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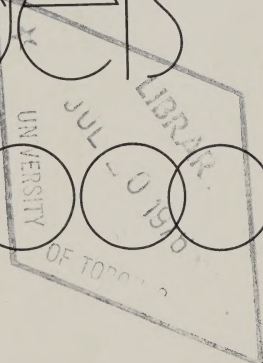




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# Discussion Leaders' Handbook



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Deputy Minister

# Discussion Leaders' Handbook





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## FOREWORD

This booklet is intended as a guide for those who find themselves in the role of discussion leaders and are not quite sure how to fulfill the responsibilities of this role. It contains nothing that is not already found elsewhere and it does not pretend to go to any great depth.

There are several things that a discussion leader can do to help a group achieve a happy ending, but perhaps the most significant variable for success is the attitude of the discussion leader himself. He must be genuinely concerned with helping other people, and convinced that this discussion is one way of achieving this goal.

Despite the length of this booklet, the discussion leader's task is not as difficult as it may seem. If the satisfaction of the group members and the achievement of the group's objectives are foremost in the leader's mind, the rest will fall into place. It is helpful to remember that most discussion leaders are selected because they have already shown a capability of fulfilling the task at hand.

One other thing to keep in mind is that a discussion group always has a specific task at hand — achieving solid conclusions on a particular subject in a specific period of time. It is not a sensitivity group, nor is it a platform for one particular point of view.

Good luck in your new responsibilities — may your conclusions be valid and the participants satisfied.



# A HANDBOOK FOR DISCUSSION LEADERS

## THE DISCUSSION GROUP

‘Truth is never pure, and rarely simple’

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act I

In the 20th century we have seen major changes come about in our knowledge of how and why people learn as well as a major redefinition of what learning is. We have found, for instance, that people learn more quickly when they are personally involved in the process of learning and when they feel that the subject vitally affects them. Participation has become the keyword.

Out of this concept of participatory learning several methods of providing a learning experience have evolved. One of these – the discussion group – is the one which we are going to examine in fuller detail. Even more specifically, we are going to look at your role, as discussion leader, in helping the participants achieve their own objectives.

Unfortunately, we must start out with warnings. The discussion group has become a popular, and, in many cases, a successful method of achieving the goals set out for it. So has aspirin. And like aspirin the discussion group is specific in its aim and completely inadequate for other problems. We would not use aspirin to treat a broken leg, nor should we use the discussion group in the place of those better ways to transmit specific information and enhance learning.

Also, it must be borne in mind that the discussion technique is just that, a technique. The discussion group is not an end in itself but

merely a method to help people learn. However, a good discussion group can help people to expand their horizons and achieve a sense of personal satisfaction. We hope to give you some of the tools necessary to achieve this goal.

The discussion group is a laboratory for the exchange of ideas for all persons in the group. It is, therefore, used when the subject to be discussed is one in which all the participants have interest, knowledge and feelings. Participants pool ideas, knowledge and experience to arrive at group decisions.

When this common background is not present, the group is in danger of pooling its ignorance. If only a limited number of persons have the necessary knowledge, the lecture, forum or panel would probably be a better or more appropriate method of transmitting it.

The topic should also be relevant to members of the group to ensure a high degree of group participation. If several discussion groups are provided to deal with specific questions around a larger topic, participants will have an opportunity to select the one most pertinent to themselves. For example, the organizers of a horticultural conference could set up groups to deal with a variety of sub-topics such as perennial plants, trees, and African violets.

The topic cannot be too limited or discussion will be stilted and inhibited as the group struggles to expand its discussion to fill the time available. On the other hand, it must be specific enough that some decisions can be reached. If the topic is too broad a sense of frustration can set in as the group becomes overwhelmed by the magnitude of it all.

Organizers should also make sure that the time set aside for the discussion groups is appropriate to the subject to be covered. Too little time often means that all participants can't have their say, conclusions reached are hasty and based on inadequate discussion and people feel rushed. If the period is too long, on the other hand, the discussion may limp and boredom may quickly set in.

**Remember**

- discussion groups are a technique
- the topic should be relevant and suitable for discussion
- the time set aside should be adequate for thorough discussion

## THE SETTING

'This must my comforts be  
The sun that warms you here shall shine on me'  
Richard II, Act I, Scene iii

If we may paraphrase Shakespeare, we may truly say of the discussion leader 'one man in his time plays many parts'. He directs the flow of discussion, introduces facts, involves people, and summarizes. Too often though he neglects one important aspect that, when lacking, can effectively destroy the group – the physical and emotional comfort of the members themselves.

### Physical Comfort

When we refer to physical comfort we are talking about those conditions which enable a person to be able to concentrate on the subject at hand, instead of continually trying to become more comfortable. The following are some of the questions a leader should consider before the session starts:

- . Is the room adequately ventilated?
- . Is the temperature right?
- . Is there good lighting?
- . Are the chairs comfortable?
- . If smoking is allowed, are ashtrays provided?
- . Can all members be seated in such a way that they can see each other without turning around?

The last question is very important because for a free and easy interchange within a group, people must be able to see one another. If they cannot, barriers to effective communication are set up.

### Emotional Comfort

Another element that is often omitted in a discussion of comfort in discussion groups is that of the emotional setting. It is here that the leader has a definite and positive role to play while the discussion group is underway. If this is ignored, no amount of expertise can make the discussion group achieve its objectives.

For a member to participate fully in a discussion group he must feel that he, and his comments, have some worth to the total group. This feeling is developed right from the beginning when he is welcomed into the group and introductions are made. He should not be left to sink or swim, but should be made to feel that he will be an important part of the group's life. The atmosphere should be



one in which participants feel free to say what they feel about the subject under discussion. They must know that disagreements with their ideas, is not a personal attack.

**Remember**

comfort is not only physical, it is also emotional.

## **GROUP PROCESS**

'And he smiled a kind of sickly smile, and curled upon the floor  
And the subsequent proceedings interested him no more'.

Bret Harte, *The Society upon the Stanislaus*

It is vital that we recognize the fact that discussion groups usually do not arrive at a decision by chance. It begins at the beginning and ends at the end by following a series of steps that are common to almost all groups. It is no accident when sound decisions are reached.

The steps are not always clearly defined but the discussion leader should always be aware of where the group is and where it is going. It is his task to help the group define its objectives and then to reach them. He is much like a hired fishing guide saying things like 'So you want bass, trout or pike?' 'How long are you prepared to spend at it?' 'How hard do you want to work?' 'Perhaps you should cast over there.' 'You reel it in and I'll help you net it'.

### **Group Stages**

The steps mentioned below are merely indicative of the general stages a group passes through. Like a road map they show the route that is being followed but not the hills and valleys or other terrain. However, they do show a logical pattern of progression.

### **Recognize the Problem**

- if a problem does not exist, why bother?
- agree on what is to be discussed
- agree that it is relevant to the group

### **Examine the Problem**

- the problem should be defined clearly enough to be able to exchange ideas and information
- the scope of the problem should be understood

### **Look at the Facts**

- What is real and what is fiction?
- discuss problems thoroughly and systematically
- diagnose why problems occur

### **Propose Tentative Decisions**

- based on the facts brought forward, what steps can be taken to remedy the problems

### **Select Suitable Decisions**

- get general agreement on the most appropriate method of dealing with the problems

After this process has been followed and completed, the leader should take time to find out if all persons are satisfied with the decisions that have been reached.

### **The Recorder**

Although later in this pamphlet we will be talking about the specific things the discussion leader and the members can do to help the group move along, there is one important person who should be mentioned. This is the recorder or for lack of a better word, the note taker.

The recorder has a very important role to play in the group. Appointed either before the group is formed or at the beginning of the session he serves as the historian – noting the important points of the discussion.

At various times during the session, he can remind the group of what has been discussed, what suggestions have been made and what decisions have been reached. At the end of the session he can briefly summarize what has happened. Often he may be called upon to give a report on a group's discussion either to a larger conference or in writing and to summarize its conclusions.

Thus a group should not pick a recorder casually (like ‘She’s the only woman here’ or ‘He has a pencil in his hand’) but should look for some specific qualities. These would include

- an ability to select important points of discussion
- an ability to accurately reflect the feelings and opinions of the group
- a willingness to do the job

### **Remember**

- a sound discussion is no accident
- a discussion group passes through certain stages and they should be recognized
- a good recorder is important to the group

## **THE DISCUSSION LEADER**

‘Whatever this is that I am, it is a little  
flesh and breath, and the ruling part’

Marcus Aurelius Antonius *Meditations* II.2

In these pages we are attempting to give you, the discussion leader, an idea of some of the things that you might do to help the group arrive at sound decisions. However, in many cases these are technical points and we do not wish to ignore the very important role played by the personal qualities and behavior of the leader.

The discussion leader must work in such a way that he encourages all the other members to express their opinions while remaining studiously neutral himself. This is often a very difficult assignment. Leaders are often selected because they hold strong opinions and have the ability to articulate them.

### **Personal Qualities**

It behooves us now to look at some of the qualities desirable in a



discussion leader. It is indeed a rare man who possesses all these qualities to their fullest extent. However, these points can be used to frame a picture of such a person. He is

### **Friendly**

- the type of person group members will respond to

### **Fair but firm**

- neutral in approach

### **An Attentive Listener**

- hearing not only the words that are spoken but what the speaker is really trying to say

### **Patient**

- participants must be allowed to clearly understand what is being said even if it slows down the progress of the group and those who are not articulate must be allowed to state their ideas

### **Clear Thinking**

- has the ability to summarize and correlate the various points of view

### **Unaggressive**

- the leader does not push his own opinions

### **Sensitive**

- must be aware of the feeling of group members
- should be aware when group consensus is reached

### **Aware of the Value of Discussion**

- the leader should be confident that the group process is a sound way to reach a decision

These then are some of the personal qualities that a discussion leader brings to the group. He is now ready to begin functioning in the particular role he has accepted. There are many things that a discussion leader can do to help the group move along towards its objective and we will deal with these next. However, it should be kept in mind that the ability to sense what is required of the leader in a certain situation comes basically through experience. We are only attempting to provide the framework for you, not make you an expert.

## **The Role of the Leader**

The following are some of the things a discussion leader can do to help the group in its examination of the topic and development of solutions.

### **Comes Prepared**

— the leader should learn as much as possible about the subject to be discussed before the group starts. This implies the gathering of facts from a variety of sources — newspapers, radio and TV, press, etc. If there is anything really pertinent to the group discussion that can be readily reproduced, copies might be given to the members. The leader, if he has any way of contacting the members beforehand, might suggest suitable readings.

### **Gets Discussion Started**

— the beginning of a discussion group must be very carefully planned, especially if the participants are unknown to each other. There are two potential dangers:

- 1) that people may be hesitant about starting to talk
- 2) that discussion starts off topic

There are several things that a leader can do to help the group get off the ground

- 1) If the group is small enough he can have everyone introduce himself.
- 2) Have the participants list the major points they wish to discuss.
- 3) Clarify the topic so that all the participants have a clear idea of what is to be discussed.

## **Helps Group Reach Conclusions**

There are a variety of different purposes for discussion groups:

- defining problems and needs
- planning programs
- evaluating programs
- raising questions to be answered later

and a vast number of other purposes. No matter what the reason for its existence, however, a discussion group follows a series of steps to reach its conclusion. The discussion leader acts as a guide for the group as it moves through this process. He sees the goal, anticipates pitfalls, warns when the wrong trail is taken, and achieves satisfaction when the group achieves its target. He must always be careful though that he does not direct the discussion and if the group decides it wants to go somewhere else — so be it!

The leader performs numerous tasks throughout the discussion. It would be impossible (and unnecessary) to enumerate them all but there are several that are crucial. These include:

- . keeping group on topic
- . encouraging individual opinions
- . making sure that the group has a clear understanding of discussion
- . encouraging friendly understanding
- . summarizing occasionally
- . indicating when and how discussion strays
- . helping avoid misunderstanding among participants where they agree and where they disagree
- . encouraging systematic methods and the use of facts
- . providing whatever information he can about the topics being discussed
- . indicating when agreement has been reached

When all is said and done the best indication of a job well done is a decision reached that provides satisfaction for all the members of the group.

**Remember**

- the personal qualities of a leader are as important as what he does
- the leader's role is to help the group achieve sound and satisfying conclusions

**MEMBERS' ROLES**

'Multitudes in the Valley of Decision'

Bible, Joel 3:14

Members have the most important roles to play in a discussion group. The way they participate and the tasks they perform will

ultimately effect the decision that they reach. At the end of this paper is an appendix listing what are called the FUNCTIONAL ROLES and NON-FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR of group members. These may be categorized as helpful and non-helpful activities of members in aiding the group to reach its objectives.

Although we are not dealing with members' non-functional behaviour directly, it can be said that this usually occurs because the conditions suggested earlier were not met.

- the room is too hot
- the topic is of no interest
- the participant has been made to feel that his ideas have no value.

The functional roles that a member plays are those that help the group achieve its objectives and help the group members achieve a feeling of satisfaction. Among the major such roles are:

- stating the issue clearly
- asking for information
- giving information
- arbitrating
- evaluating progress

As can readily be seen many of the tasks are the same as those of the leader. Indeed, this is one key to the measurement of a group's effectiveness — the degree to which members assume the various tasks of leadership. The group should be encouraged to share this leadership amongst all members and not become dependent upon the assigned discussion leader.

At various times in the life of a discussion group different members will play different roles. Thus, the leader should always steer clear of stereo-typing the group members. Many a good suggestion has been overlooked because the members feel that 'anything that comes from that buffoon may be funny but it's not helpful'.

The leader then should regard the discussion group as a "members' group" and encourage them to use it to achieve satisfaction.



## **Remember**

- the most important people in a discussion group are the members
- the roles of members are ever changing but they should be encouraged to take on leadership
- leadership cannot be given, it is only accepted

## **TECHNIQUES**

‘You know my methods, Watson’

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*

To deal with discussion group techniques in less than a full book is to court disaster. They are not intended as substitutes for full and open discussion but only used in specific situations. Thus when listing several of these we can only add the warning – ‘handle with caution’.

The following list is not a complete one. It touches only on a few of the possible techniques that can be used in a discussion group and even then are only lightly dealt with.

### **Voting**

A vote in a discussion group runs a far distant second to reaching a consensus as a way of making a decision. A decision based on a 6-5 ratio has split a group, perhaps needlessly.

A straw vote which indicates opinion and not a decision can sometimes be helpful to further discussion.

### **Brainstorming**

The technique of brainstorming is often useful if one wishes to get out a lot of ideas when there are many possible solutions or programs for a specific problem.

With this method the problem is posed and participants are given a specified amount of time (e.g. 4 minutes) to come out with all the

solutions they can think of. During this time no discussion is permitted on whether or not an idea is good or bad. The ideas are listed and form the basis for the discussion which follows.

### **Role Playing**

There are many variations of role playing that can be used in a discussion group. If you are interested in further information, your local library should have books and articles that deal with this topic.

### **Sub-Group Discussion**

If there is one point that is to be discussed in detail and a definite conclusion drawn it is sometimes possible to split up the discussion group into smaller units for a limited period of time. After this is finished they report back to the larger discussion group.

### **Visual Aids**

It is very helpful if a blackboard or sheets of newsprint are available for the group use.

If a discussion leader is interested in learning about his craft there are a variety of books on the subject that deal much more extensively with techniques. The bibliography to this booklet lists some and the library will have many more.

### **Remember**

- . techniques are no substitute for sound discussion
- . they are used to add an extra dimension

## **AT THE END**

'This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning'.

Winston Churchill

Since a discussion group does not exist in a vacuum it is necessary that we know to what end the conclusions of the group will be

used. If these conclusions were valid then they must be of some use.

A discussion group has usually been spun off of a larger forum and has to report to this group. Depending on what has been requested of the group, this can be an important part of the discussion.

Sometimes groups are asked to bring in recommended programs or solutions. If this is the case, time should be taken in the group to get agreement as to what these recommendations are to be and what is to be said. Unless this is done the group is often surprised to hear their representative give a report that sounds nothing like what they remember went on.

If the group has been asked to come up with questions to be used in the larger session they should agree on what questions are to be asked and in what order. Then if time runs out before all the questions have been answered the most important ones will have been asked.

If at all possible a report of the proceedings of the group should be given to the members as soon as possible after the meeting is over. It will serve to refresh their memory of what went on and to remind them of further action to be taken.

If the group has agreed to take further action then some members should be assigned the necessary responsibilities before the meeting ends. Otherwise, it becomes much more difficult to get people to take action because it is not as fresh in their mind and the degree of commitment to decisions decreases.

**Remember**

- agreements as to future action should be reached and understood by all participants before the group adjourns.

**CONCLUSION**

We have briefly glanced at the discussion group and your role as its leader. Without wishing to get more involved in the limited space

we have available perhaps we should sum up by saying that the discussion leader has to be in a position to acquire three things:

knowledge  
experience  
understanding

In this paper we have tried to provide an opportunity for you to gain some **knowledge** of the group process and group leadership techniques. It is by no means complete but we hope that you have learned something that will be helpful to you in your discussion group.

As you become involved in discussions you will gain the **experience** in helping people to achieve effective group decisions.

**Understanding** can only come about through your own effort. You must believe in people and in their ability to achieve sound decisions through the discussion group process. If this is not acquired all the rest is game playing.

We started with a warning, now let us end with one. This booklet is merely a tool and if it appears you are going to be called upon to play a different role than the one described herein to help the group members achieve their objectives then the book goes out the window. This is not intended to be your bible.



## APPENDIX

### FUNCTIONAL ROLES AND NON-FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR

Reprinted from ADULT LEADERSHIP  
'tool kit' of January 1953

ADULT LEADERSHIP  
is a publication of the  
Adult Education Association of the  
U.S.A.

Here is a glossary of some of the most essential **functional roles** of group members.

**Task Roles** (functions required in selecting and carrying out a group task)

Initiating activity: proposing solutions; suggesting new ideas, new definitions of the problem, new attack on problem or new organization of material.

Seeking information: asking for clarification of suggestions, requesting additional information or facts.

Seeking opinion: looking for an expression of feeling about something from the members, seeking clarification of values, or suggestions or ideas.

Giving information: offering facts or generalizations, relating one's own experience to group problem to illustrate a point.

Giving opinion: stating an opinion or belief concerning a suggestion or one of several suggestions, particularly concerning its value rather than its factual basis.

Elaborating: clarifying, giving examples or developing meanings, trying to envision how a proposal might work out if adopted.

Co-ordinating: showing relationships among various ideas or suggestions, trying to pull ideas and suggestions together, trying to draw together activities of various sub-groups or members.

Summarizing: pulling together related ideas or suggestions, re-stating suggestions after the group has discussed them.

Testing feasibility: making application of suggestions to real situations, examining practicality and workability of ideas, pre-evaluating decisions.

**Group Building and Maintenance Roles** (functions required in strengthening and maintaining group life and activities)

Encouraging: being friendly, warm, responsive to others, praising others and their ideas, agreeing with and accepting contributions of others.

Gate keeping: trying to make it possible for another member to make a contribution to the group by saying, 'We haven't heard anything from Jim, yet,' or suggesting limited talking time for everyone so that all will have a chance to be heard.

Standard setting: expressing standards for the group to use in choosing its content or procedures, or in evaluating its decisions; reminding the group to avoid decisions which conflict with group standards.

Following: going along with the decisions of the group, somewhat passively accepting ideas of others, serving as audience during group discussions and decision-making.

Expressing group feelings: summarizing what the group feeling is sensed to be, describing reactions of the group to ideas or solutions.

**Both Group Task and Group Maintenance Roles**

Evaluating: submitting group decisions or accomplishments to comparison with group standards, measuring accomplishments against goals.

Diagnosing:	determining sources of difficulties, appropriate steps to take next, the main blocks to progress.
Testing for consensus:	tentatively asking for group opinions in order to find out if the group is nearing consensus on a decision, sending up trial balloons to test group opinions.
Mediating:	harmonizing, conciliating differences in points of view, making compromise solutions.
Relieving tension:	draining off negative feeling by testing or pouring oil on troubled waters, putting a tense situation in a wider context.

From time to time – more often perhaps than anyone likes to admit – people behave in NON-FUNCTIONAL ways that do not help and sometimes actually harm the group and the work it is trying to do. Some of the more common types of non-functional behaviour are described below.

**Note:** In using a classification like the one above, people need to guard against the tendency to blame any person (whether themselves or another) who falls into “non-functional” behaviour. It is more useful to regard such behaviour as a symptom that all is not well with the group’s ability to satisfy individual needs through group-centred activity. Further, people need to be alert to the fact that each person is likely to interpret such behaviour differently. For example, what appears as “blocking” to one person may appear to another as a needed effort to “test feasibility”.

## **Types of Non-functional Behaviour**

Being aggressive:	working for status by criticizing or blaming others, showing hostility against the group or some individual, deflating the ego or status of others.
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Blocking:	interfering with the progress of the group by going off on a tangent, citing personal experiences unrelated to the problem arguing too much on a point, rejecting ideas without consideration.
Self-confessing:	using the group as a sounding board, expressing personal, non-group-oriented feelings or points of view.
Competing:	vying with others to produce the best idea, talk the most, play the most roles, gain favour with the leader.
Seeking sympathy:	trying to induce other group members TO BE SYMPATHETIC to one's problems or misfortunes, deploring one's own situation or disparaging one's own ideas to gain support.
Special pleading:	introducing or supporting suggestions related to one's own pet concerns or philosophies, lobbying.
Horsing around:	clowning, joking, mimicking, disrupting the work of the group.
Seeking recognition:	attempting to call attention to one's self by loud or excessive talking, extreme ideas, unusual behaviour.
Withdrawing:	acting indifferent or passive, resorting to excessive formality, daydreaming, doodling, whispering to others, wandering from the subject.

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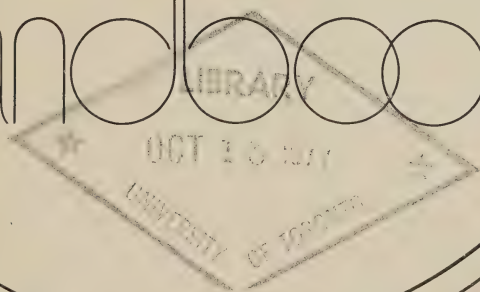


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## THE DISCUSSION GROUP

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Also, it must be borne in mind that the discussion technique is just that, a technique. The discussion group is not an end in itself but

merely a method to help people learn. However, a good discussion group can help people to expand their horizons and achieve a sense of personal satisfaction. We hope to give you some of the tools necessary to achieve this goal.

The discussion group is a laboratory for the exchange of ideas for all persons in the group. It is, therefore, used when the subject to be discussed is one in which all the participants have interest, knowledge and feelings. Participants pool ideas, knowledge and experience to arrive at group decisions.

When this common background is not present, the group is in danger of pooling its ignorance. If only a limited number of persons have the necessary knowledge, the lecture, forum or panel would probably be a better or more appropriate method of transmitting it.

The topic should also be relevant to members of the group to ensure a high degree of group participation. If several discussion groups are provided to deal with specific questions around a larger topic, participants will have an opportunity to select the one most pertinent to themselves. For example, the organizers of a horticultural conference could set up groups to deal with a variety of sub-topics such as perennial plants, trees, and African violets.

The topic cannot be too limited or discussion will be stilted and inhibited as the group struggles to expand its discussion to fill the time available. On the other hand, it must be specific enough that some decisions can be reached. If the topic is too broad a sense of frustration can set in as the group becomes overwhelmed by the magnitude of it all.

Organizers should also make sure that the time set aside for the discussion groups is appropriate to the subject to be covered. Too little time often means that all participants can't have their say, conclusions reached are hasty and based on inadequate discussion and people feel rushed. If the period is too long, on the other hand, the discussion may limp and boredom may quickly set in.

**Remember**

- discussion groups are a technique
- the topic should be relevant and suitable for discussion
- the time set aside should be adequate for thorough discussion

## THE SETTING

'This must my comforts be  
The sun that warms you here shall shine on me'  
Richard II, Act I, Scene iii

If we may paraphrase Shakespeare, we may truly say of the discussion leader 'one man in his time plays many parts'. He directs the flow of discussion, introduces facts, involves people, and summarizes. Too often though he neglects one important aspect that, when lacking, can effectively destroy the group – the physical and emotional comfort of the members themselves.

### Physical Comfort

When we refer to physical comfort we are talking about those conditions which enable a person to be able to concentrate on the subject at hand, instead of continually trying to become more comfortable. The following are some of the questions a leader should consider before the session starts:

- . Is the room adequately ventilated?
- . Is the temperature right?
- . Is there good lighting?
- . Are the chairs comfortable?
- . If smoking is allowed, are ashtrays provided?
- . Can all members be seated in such a way that they can see each other without turning around?

The last question is very important because for a free and easy interchange within a group, people must be able to see one another. If they cannot, barriers to effective communication are set up.

### Emotional Comfort

Another element that is often omitted in a discussion of comfort in discussion groups is that of the emotional setting. It is here that the leader has a definite and positive role to play while the discussion group is underway. If this is ignored, no amount of expertise can make the discussion group achieve its objectives.

For a member to participate fully in a discussion group he must feel that he, and his comments, have some worth to the total group. This feeling is developed right from the beginning when he is welcomed into the group and introductions are made. He should not be left to sink or swim, but should be made to feel that he will be an important part of the group's life. The atmosphere should be

one in which participants feel free to say what they feel about the subject under discussion. They must know that disagreements with their ideas, is not a personal attack.

**Remember**

comfort is not only physical, it is also emotional.

## GROUP PROCESS

'And he smiled a kind of sickly smile, and curled upon the floor  
And the subsequent proceedings interested him no more'.

Bret Harte, *The Society upon the Stanislaus*

It is vital that we recognize the fact that discussion groups usually do not arrive at a decision by chance. It begins at the beginning and ends at the end by following a series of steps that are common to almost all groups. It is no accident when sound decisions are reached.

The steps are not always clearly defined but the discussion leader should always be aware of where the group is and where it is going. It is his task to help the group define its objectives and then to reach them. He is much like a hired fishing guide saying things like 'So you want bass, trout or pike?' 'How long are you prepared to spend at it?' 'How hard do you want to work?' 'Perhaps you should cast over there.' 'You reel it in and I'll help you net it'.

### Group Stages

The steps mentioned below are merely indicative of the general stages a group passes through. Like a road map they show the route that is being followed but not the hills and valleys or other terrain. However, they do show a logical pattern of progression.



### **Recognize the Problem**

- if a problem does not exist, why bother?
- agree on what is to be discussed
- agree that it is relevant to the group

### **Examine the Problem**

- the problem should be defined clearly enough to be able to exchange ideas and information
- the scope of the problem should be understood

### **Look at the Facts**

- What is real and what is fiction?
- discuss problems thoroughly and systematically
- diagnose why problems occur

### **Propose Tentative Decisions**

- based on the facts brought forward, what steps can be taken to remedy the problems

### **Select Suitable Decisions**

- get general agreement on the most appropriate method of dealing with the problems

After this process has been followed and completed, the leader should take time to find out if all persons are satisfied with the decisions that have been reached.

### **The Recorder**

Although later in this pamphlet we will be talking about the specific things the discussion leader and the members can do to help the group move along, there is one important person who should be mentioned. This is the recorder or for lack of a better word, the note taker.

The recorder has a very important role to play in the group. Appointed either before the group is formed or at the beginning of the session he serves as the historian – noting the important points of the discussion.

At various times during the session, he can remind the group of what has been discussed, what suggestions have been made and what decisions have been reached. At the end of the session he can briefly summarize what has happened. Often he may be called upon to give a report on a group's discussion either to a larger conference or in writing and to summarize its conclusions.

Thus a group should not pick a recorder casually (like 'She's the only woman here' or 'He has a pencil in his hand') but should look for some specific qualities. These would include

- an ability to select important points of discussion
- an ability to accurately reflect the feelings and opinions of the group
- a willingness to do the job

### **Remember**

- a sound discussion is no accident
- a discussion group passes through certain stages and they should be recognized
- a good recorder is important to the group

## **THE DISCUSSION LEADER**

'Whatever this is that I am, it is a little  
flesh and breath, and the ruling part'

Marcus Aurelius Antonius *Meditations* II.2

In these pages we are attempting to give you, the discussion leader, an idea of some of the things that you might do to help the group arrive at sound decisions. However, in many cases these are technical points and we do not wish to ignore the very important role played by the personal qualities and behavior of the leader.

The discussion leader must work in such a way that he encourages all the other members to express their opinions while remaining studiously neutral himself. This is often a very difficult assignment. Leaders are often selected because they hold strong opinions and have the ability to articulate them.

### **Personal Qualities**

It behooves us now to look at some of the qualities desirable in a

discussion leader. It is indeed a rare man who possesses all these qualities to their fullest extent. However, these points can be used to frame a picture of such a person. He is

### **Friendly**

- the type of person group members will respond to

### **Fair but firm**

- neutral in approach

### **An Attentive Listener**

- hearing not only the words that are spoken but what the speaker is really trying to say

### **Patient**

- participants must be allowed to clearly understand what is being said even if it slows down the progress of the group and those who are not articulate must be allowed to state their ideas

### **Clear Thinking**

- has the ability to summarize and correlate the various points of view

### **Unaggressive**

- the leader does not push his own opinions

### **Sensitive**

- must be aware of the feeling of group members
- should be aware when group consensus is reached

### **Aware of the Value of Discussion**

- the leader should be confident that the group process is a sound way to reach a decision

These then are some of the personal qualities that a discussion leader brings to the group. He is now ready to begin functioning in the particular role he has accepted. There are many things that a discussion leader can do to help the group move along towards its objective and we will deal with these next. However, it should be kept in mind that the ability to sense what is required of the leader in a certain situation comes basically through experience. We are only attempting to provide the framework for you, not make you an expert.

## **The Role of the Leader**

The following are some of the things a discussion leader can do to help the group in its examination of the topic and development of solutions.

### **Comes Prepared**

— the leader should learn as much as possible about the subject to be discussed before the group starts. This implies the gathering of facts from a variety of sources — newspapers, radio and TV, press, etc. If there is anything really pertinent to the group discussion that can be readily reproduced, copies might be given to the members. The leader, if he has any way of contacting the members beforehand, might suggest suitable readings.

### **Gets Discussion Started**

— the beginning of a discussion group must be very carefully planned, especially if the participants are unknown to each other. There are two potential dangers:

- 1) that people may be hesitant about starting to talk
- 2) that discussion starts off topic

There are several things that a leader can do to help the group get off the ground

- 1) If the group is small enough he can have everyone introduce himself.
- 2) Have the participants list the major points they wish to discuss.
- 3) Clarify the topic so that all the participants have a clear idea of what is to be discussed.

### **Helps Group Reach Conclusions**

There are a variety of different purposes for discussion groups:

- defining problems and needs
- planning programs
- evaluating programs
- raising questions to be answered later

and a vast number of other purposes. No matter what the reason for its existence, however, a discussion group follows a series of steps to reach its conclusion. The discussion leader acts as a guide for the group as it moves through this process. He sees the goal, anticipates pitfalls, warns when the wrong trail is taken, and achieves satisfaction when the group achieves its target. He must always be careful though that he does not direct the discussion and if the group decides it wants to go somewhere else — so be it!

The leader performs numerous tasks throughout the discussion. It would be impossible (and unnecessary) to enumerate them all but there are several that are crucial. These include:

- . keeping group on topic
- . encouraging individual opinions
- . making sure that the group has a clear understanding of discussion
- . encouraging friendly understanding
- . summarizing occasionally
- . indicating when and how discussion strays
- . helping avoid misunderstanding among participants where they agree and where they disagree
- . encouraging systematic methods and the use of facts
- . providing whatever information he can about the topics being discussed
- . indicating when agreement has been reached

When all is said and done the best indication of a job well done is a decision reached that provides satisfaction for all the members of the group.

**Remember**

- the personal qualities of a leader are as important as what he does
- the leader's role is to help the group achieve sound and satisfying conclusions

## MEMBERS' ROLES

'Multitudes in the Valley of Decision'

Bible, Joel 3:14

Members have the most important roles to play in a discussion group. The way they participate and the tasks they perform will



ultimately effect the decision that they reach. At the end of this paper is an appendix listing what are called the FUNCTIONAL ROLES and NON-FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR of group members. These may be categorized as helpful and non-helpful activities of members in aiding the group to reach its objectives.

Although we are not dealing with members' non-functional behaviour directly, it can be said that this usually occurs because the conditions suggested earlier were not met.

- the room is too hot
- the topic is of no interest
- the participant has been made to feel that his ideas have no value.

The functional roles that a member plays are those that help the group achieve its objectives and help the group members achieve a feeling of satisfaction. Among the major such roles are:

- stating the issue clearly
- asking for information
- giving information
- arbitrating
- evaluating progress

As can readily be seen many of the tasks are the same as those of the leader. Indeed, this is one key to the measurement of a group's effectiveness — the degree to which members assume the various tasks of leadership. The group should be encouraged to share this leadership amongst all members and not become dependent upon the assigned discussion leader.

At various times in the life of a discussion group different members will play different roles. Thus, the leader should always steer clear of stereo-typing the group members. Many a good suggestion has been overlooked because the members feel that 'anything that comes from that buffoon may be funny but it's not helpful'.

The leader then should regard the discussion group as a "members' group" and encourage them to use it to achieve satisfaction.

## **Remember**

- the most important people in a discussion group are the members
- the roles of members are ever changing but they should be encouraged to take on leadership
- leadership cannot be given, it is only accepted

## **TECHNIQUES**

‘You know my methods, Watson’

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*

To deal with discussion group techniques in less than a full book is to court disaster. They are not intended as substitutes for full and open discussion but only used in specific situations. Thus when listing several of these we can only add the warning – ‘handle with caution’.

The following list is not a complete one. It touches only on a few of the possible techniques that can be used in a discussion group and even then are only lightly dealt with.

### **Voting**

A vote in a discussion group runs a far distant second to reaching a consensus as a way of making a decision. A decision based on a 6-5 ratio has split a group, perhaps needlessly.

A straw vote which indicates opinion and not a decision can sometimes be helpful to further discussion.

### **Brainstorming**

The technique of brainstorming is often useful if one wishes to get out a lot of ideas when there are many possible solutions or programs for a specific problem.

With this method the problem is posed and participants are given a specified amount of time (e.g. 4 minutes) to come out with all the

solutions they can think of. During this time no discussion is permitted on whether or not an idea is good or bad. The ideas are listed and form the basis for the discussion which follows.

### **Role Playing**

There are many variations of role playing that can be used in a discussion group. If you are interested in further information, your local library should have books and articles that deal with this topic.

### **Sub-Group Discussion**

If there is one point that is to be discussed in detail and a definite conclusion drawn it is sometimes possible to split up the discussion group into smaller units for a limited period of time. After this is finished they report back to the larger discussion group.

### **Visual Aids**

It is very helpful if a blackboard or sheets of newsprint are available for the group use.

If a discussion leader is interested in learning about his craft there are a variety of books on the subject that deal much more extensively with techniques. The bibliography to this booklet lists some and the library will have many more.

### **Remember**

- . techniques are no substitute for sound discussion
- . they are used to add an extra dimension

## **AT THE END**

'This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning'.

Winston Churchill

Since a discussion group does not exist in a vacuum it is necessary that we know to what end the conclusions of the group will be

used. If these conclusions were valid then they must be of some use.

A discussion group has usually been spun off of a larger forum and has to report to this group. Depending on what has been requested of the group, this can be an important part of the discussion.

Sometimes groups are asked to bring in recommended programs or solutions. If this is the case, time should be taken in the group to get agreement as to what these recommendations are to be and what is to be said. Unless this is done the group is often surprised to hear their representative give a report that sounds nothing like what they remember went on.

If the group has been asked to come up with questions to be used in the larger session they should agree on what questions are to be asked and in what order. Then if time runs out before all the questions have been answered the most important ones will have been asked.

If at all possible a report of the proceedings of the group should be given to the members as soon as possible after the meeting is over. It will serve to refresh their memory of what went on and to remind them of further action to be taken.

If the group has agreed to take further action then some members should be assigned the necessary responsibilities before the meeting ends. Otherwise, it becomes much more difficult to get people to take action because it is not as fresh in their mind and the degree of commitment to decisions decreases.

#### **Remember**

- agreements as to future action should be reached and understood by all participants before the group adjourns.

## **CONCLUSION**

We have briefly glanced at the discussion group and your role as its leader. Without wishing to get more involved in the limited space

we have available perhaps we should sum up by saying that the discussion leader has to be in a position to acquire three things:

- knowledge
- experience
- understanding

In this paper we have tried to provide an opportunity for you to gain some **knowledge** of the group process and group leadership techniques. It is by no means complete but we hope that you have learned something that will be helpful to you in your discussion group.

As you become involved in discussions you will gain the **experience** in helping people to achieve effective group decisions.

**Understanding** can only come about through your own effort. You must believe in people and in their ability to achieve sound decisions through the discussion group process. If this is not acquired all the rest is game playing.

We started with a warning, now let us end with one. This booklet is merely a tool and if it appears you are going to be called upon to play a different role than the one described herein to help the group members achieve their objectives then the book goes out the window. This is not intended to be your bible.



## APPENDIX

### FUNCTIONAL ROLES AND NON-FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR

Reprinted from ADULT LEADERSHIP  
'tool kit' of January 1953

ADULT LEADERSHIP  
is a publication of the  
Adult Education Association of the  
U.S.A.

Here is a glossary of some of the most essential **functional roles** of group members.

**Task Roles** (functions required in selecting and carrying out a group task)

Initiating activity:	proposing solutions; suggesting new ideas, new definitions of the problem, new attack on problem or new organization of material.
Seeking information:	asking for clarification of suggestions, requesting additional information or facts.
Seeking opinion:	looking for an expression of feeling about something from the members, seeking clarification of values, or suggestions or ideas.
Giving information:	offering facts or generalizations, relating one's own experience to group problem to illustrate a point.
Giving opinion:	stating an opinion or belief concerning a suggestion or one of several suggestions, particularly concerning its value rather than its factual basis.
Elaborating:	clarifying, giving examples or developing meanings, trying to envision how a proposal might work out if adopted.
Co-ordinating:	showing relationships among various ideas or suggestions, trying to pull ideas and suggestions together, trying to draw together activities of various sub-groups or members.
Summarizing:	pulling together related ideas or suggestions, re-stating suggestions after the group has discussed them.

Testing feasibility: making application of suggestions to real situations, examining practicality and workability of ideas, pre-evaluating decisions.

### **Group Building and Maintenance Roles** (functions required in strengthening and maintaining group life and activities)

Encouraging: being friendly, warm, responsive to others, praising others and their ideas, agreeing with and accepting contributions of others.

Gate keeping: trying to make it possible for another member to make a contribution to the group by saying, 'We haven't heard anything from Jim, yet,' or suggesting limited talking time for everyone so that all will have a chance to be heard.

Standard setting: expressing standards for the group to use in choosing its content or procedures, or in evaluating its decisions; reminding the group to avoid decisions which conflict with group standards.

Following: going along with the decisions of the group, somewhat passively accepting ideas of others, serving as audience during group discussions and decision-making.

Expressing group feelings: summarizing what the group feeling is sensed to be, describing reactions of the group to ideas or solutions.

### **Both Group Task and Group Maintenance Roles**

Evaluating: submitting group decisions or accomplishments to comparison with group standards, measuring accomplishments against goals.

Diagnosing:	determining sources of difficulties, appropriate steps to take next, the main blocks to progress.
Testing for consensus:	tentatively asking for group opinions in order to find out if the group is nearing consensus on a decision, sending up trial balloons to test group opinions.
Mediating:	harmonizing, conciliating differences in points of view, making compromise solutions.
Relieving tension:	draining off negative feeling by testing or pouring oil on troubled waters, putting a tense situation in a wider context.

From time to time – more often perhaps than anyone likes to admit – people behave in NON-FUNCTIONAL ways that do not help and sometimes actually harm the group and the work it is trying to do. Some of the more common types of non-functional behaviour are described below.

**Note:** In using a classification like the one above, people need to guard against the tendency to blame any person (whether themselves or another) who falls into “non-functional” behaviour. It is more useful to regard such behaviour as a symptom that all is not well with the group’s ability to satisfy individual needs through group-centred activity. Further, people need to be alert to the fact that each person is likely to interpret such behaviour differently. For example, what appears as “blocking” to one person may appear to another as a needed effort to “test feasibility”.

## Types of Non-functional Behaviour

Being aggressive:	working for status by criticizing or blaming others, showing hostility against the group or some individual, deflating the ego or status of others.
-------------------	---

Blocking:	interfering with the progress of the group by going off on a tangent, citing personal experiences unrelated to the problem arguing too much on a point, rejecting ideas without consideration.
Self-confessing:	using the group as a sounding board, expressing personal, non-group-oriented feelings or points of view.
Competing:	vying with others to produce the best idea, talk the most, play the most roles, gain favour with the leader.
Seeking sympathy:	trying to induce other group members TO BE SYMPATHETIC to one's problems or misfortunes, deploring one's own situation or disparaging one's own ideas to gain support.
Special pleading:	introducing or supporting suggestions related to one's own pet concerns or philosophies, lobbying.
Horsing around:	clowning, joking, mimicking, disrupting the work of the group.
Seeking recognition:	attempting to call attention to one's self by loud or excessive talking, extreme ideas, unusual behaviour.
Withdrawing:	acting indifferent or passive, resorting to excessive formality, daydreaming, doodling, whispering to others, wandering from the subject.

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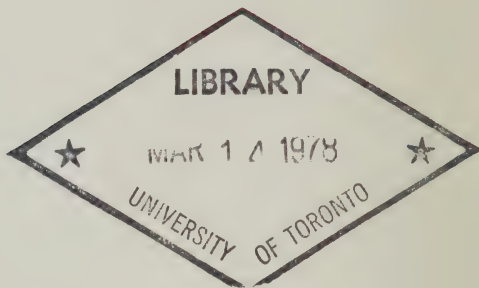
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# Le manuel de L'animateur D'une Discussion

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# Le manuel de L'animateur D'une Discussion



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## AVANT-PROPOS

Cette brochure constitue un guide pour ceux qui doivent remplir les fonctions d'animateur d'une discussion et qui ne savent pas exactement comment assumer leurs responsabilités; elle ne présente rien de nouveau et elle ne constitue pas une étude approfondie du sujet. Il y a plusieurs choses que l'animateur d'une discussion peut faire pour aider les membres d'un groupe à se quitter en bons termes, mais c'est son attitude personnelle qui influe le plus sur le succès de la discussion. Il doit désirer sincèrement aider les autres et être persuadé que la discussion est l'un des moyens d'y parvenir.

Malgré la longueur de cette brochure, la tâche de l'animateur d'une discussion n'est pas aussi ardue qu'on pourrait le croire. Si l'animateur vise avant tout à obtenir la satisfaction des membres du groupe et la réalisation de leurs objectifs, tout le reste s'arrange. Il est utile de se rappeler que la majorité des animateurs de discussions sont choisis parce qu'ils ont déjà prouvé qu'ils peuvent faire face aux tâches qui se présentent à eux.

Rappelons-nous également qu'un groupe de discussion doit toujours viser un objectif spécifique, c'est-à-dire arriver à des conclusions solides sur un sujet particulier, en un temps donné. Il ne s'agit ni d'un "groupe de communication par la sensibilité", ni d'une tribune pour présenter un point de vue particulier.

Nous vous souhaitons bonne chance dans votre rôle — et nous espérons que les conclusions de votre groupe seront valables et que tous les participants seront satisfaits!



# MANUEL À L'INTENTION DE L'ANIMATEUR D'UNE DISCUSSION

## LE GROUPE DE DISCUSSION

‘La vérité n’est jamais pure, et elle est rarement simple’

Oscar Wilde, “The Importance of Being Earnest”, Act. 1.

Au 20<sup>e</sup> siècle, nous avons dû reviser considérablement nos connaissances des raisons qui poussent les gens à apprendre et de la façon dont ils apprennent, et nous avons dû donner une nouvelle définition au terme “apprendre”. Nous avons constaté, par exemple, que l’on apprend plus vite si l’on est personnellement engagé et si l’on estime que le sujet que l’on apprend est d’une importance capitale pour soi. Le terme “participation” est devenu le mot clé.

Cette idée d’apprendre par la participation a donné naissance à plusieurs méthodes dont l’une — le groupe de discussion — est celle que nous allons examiner en détail. Puis, nous étudierons plus particulièrement votre rôle, en tant qu’animateur d’une discussion, pour aider les participants à atteindre leurs objectifs. Mais pour commencer, nous devons vous donner quelques avertissements. La méthode du groupe de discussion est devenue populaire et, c’est celle qui a permis d’atteindre les objectifs visés. Dans un domaine tout à fait différent, il en est de même de l’aspirine qui donne également de bons résultats dans certains cas. De même, il est évident que le groupe de discussion est parfait pour atteindre un certain but déterminé, mais s’avère totalement inapproprié pour résoudre d’autres problèmes. Il ne nous viendrait pas à l’esprit d’administrer de l’aspirine pour soigner une fracture de la jambe! De même, nous ne devons pas utiliser la méthode du groupe de discussion à la place des méthodes qui se sont avérées meilleures pour transmettre des renseignements particuliers et pour améliorer l’acquisition de connaissances.

Il faut également se rappeler que la technique de la discussion n’est, en tout et pour tout, qu’une technique. Le groupe de discussion n’est pas une fin en soi, mais simplement un moyen d’aider à apprendre. Toutefois, un bon groupe de discussion peut aider les gens à élargir leurs horizons et à obtenir un sentiment de satisfaction personnelle. Nous espérons vous donner ici quelques méthodes qui vous aideront à atteindre cet objectif.

Le groupe de discussion constitue un “laboratoire” pour l’échange d’idées entre les membres du groupe. C’est pourquoi on y a recours si le sujet à discuter est connu de tous les participants et s’il présente de l’intérêt pour eux. Pour arriver à prendre des décisions collectives, les participants mettent en commun leurs idées, leurs connaissances et leur expérience.

Mais si ces connaissances de base font défaut, le groupe risque de ne mettre en commun que son ignorance. Donc, si un nombre limité seulement de personnes possèdent les connaissances nécessaires, il vaut mieux adopter les méthodes de la conférence, du débat ou du jury d’experts, qui donneraient de meilleurs résultats pour la transmission de ces connaissances.

Pour s’assurer de la bonne participation des membres du groupe, il faut également que le sujet présente de l’intérêt pour tous. Si plusieurs groupes de discussion doivent traiter de questions spécifiques concernant un sujet plus vaste, les participants ont la possibilité de choisir celui qu’ils connaissent le mieux. Par exemple, les organisateurs d’une conférence sur l’horticulture pourraient organiser des groupes qui traiteraient de toute une variété de sujets secondaires — plantes vivaces, arbres et violettes africaines.

Il ne faut pas que le sujet soit trop limité, sinon la discussion risque d’être guindée et languissante, le groupe cherchant péniblement à élargir le domaine de la discussion pour occuper le temps qui reste. Par contre, le sujet doit être assez spécifique pour qu’il soit possible de prendre des décisions. Si le sujet est trop vaste un sentiment de frustration risque de gagner les membres du groupe devant l’envergure du projet.

Les organisateurs doivent également s’assurer que la durée de la discussion est établie en fonction du sujet discuté. Si cette durée est trop courte, souvent les participants ne peuvent pas tous émettre leur point de vue, les conclusions auxquelles ils arrivent sont précitées et basées sur une discussion insuffisante et les membres ont l’impression qu’on les mène trop vite. Par ailleurs, si la durée est trop longue, la discussion risque de traîner et l’ennui de gagner les participants.

### **Rappelez-vous ceci**

- les groupes de discussion constituent une technique
- le sujet à discuter doit être approprié et applicable à la discussion
- la durée de la discussion doit être assez longue pour permettre une discussion sérieuse du sujet



## LE LOCAL

'This must my comforts be  
The sun that warms you here shall shine on me'  
Richard II, Act 1, Scene iii

'Ma consolation, c'est que le soleil qui vous réchauffe ici luira sur moi!'

Richard II, Acte 1, Scène 3

Si nous pouvons nous permettre de paraphraser Shakespeare, nous dirons que l'animateur d'une discussion est "un homme qui doit jouer plusieurs rôles". Il dirige la discussion, il présente des faits, il incite les participants à s'engager et il résume sommairement les débats. Et pourtant, il oublie trop souvent un point important qui risque, si on le néglige, de détruire le groupe — il s'agit du confort physique et du confort affectif des membres du groupe.

### Le confort physique

En mentionnant le confort physique, nous entendons par là les conditions qui permettent aux personnes présentes de pouvoir concentrer leur attention sur le sujet qui fait l'objet de la discussion, au lieu d'essayer continuellement de se mettre à l'aise. Nous vous donnons ci-dessous la liste de quelques questions qu'un animateur doit prendre en considération avant le début de la séance:

- L'aération de la salle est-elle suffisante?
- La température est-elle agréable?
- La pièce est-elle bien éclairée?
- Les sièges sont-ils confortables?
- S'il est permis de fumer, y a-t-il des cendriers?
- Les membres du groupe peuvent-ils s'asseoir de façon à se voir sans se retourner?

La dernière question est très importante. En effet, pour que les membres du groupe puissent communiquer librement, il faut qu'ils se voient. Sinon, l'efficacité de la communication est entravée.

### Le confort affectif

Lors d'une discussion sur le confort dans les groupes de discussion, on oublie souvent l'aspect affectif. Là encore, l'animateur a un rôle bien défini à jouer une fois que les membres du groupe sont réunis.

S'il n'en tient pas compte, toutes les connaissances du monde ne suffiront pas à amener le groupe à atteindre ses objectifs.

Pour que chaque membre puisse participer pleinement à la discussion, il faut qu'il ait l'impression que sa présence et ses observations ont une valeur certaine pour le groupe. Ce sentiment est créé dès son arrivée, au moment des présentations. Il ne faut pas le laisser à lui-même, mais il faut lui faire sentir que sa contribution est importante pour le groupe. L'atmosphère doit être telle qu'il se sente libre d'exprimer son opinion sur le sujet débattu. De plus, si l'on ne partage pas son avis, il ne doit pas l'interpréter comme si ces critiques s'adressent à lui personnellement.

### **Rappelez-vous ceci:**

- le confort doit être non seulement physique, mais également affectif.

## **FAÇON DE PROCÉDER**

'Il eut un pâle sourire, il se recroquevilla sur le plancher et se désintéressa totalement des débats ultérieurs.'

Bret Harte, "The Society upon the Stanislaus"

Il est très important de comprendre qu'habituellement les groupes de discussion n'arrivent pas à leurs décisions par hasard. La discussion, du début à la fin, se déroule suivant une série d'étapes qui sont communes à la plupart des groupes. Comme nous l'avons dit, rien n'est laissé au hasard.

Ces étapes ne sont pas toujours clairement définies, mais l'animateur d'une discussion doit toujours savoir exactement où en est la discussion et quel est son cours. Il lui incombe d'aider le groupe à définir ses objectifs, puis à les atteindre. On pourrait le comparer à un guide de pêche qui dirait à son client: "Vous désirez pêcher l'achigan, la truite ou le brochet?" "Combien de temps désirez-vous y passer?" "Désirez-vous y consacrer beaucoup d'efforts?" "Vous devriez peut-être lancer la ligne là-bas". "Remontez le poisson et je vous aiderai à l'attraper avec l'épuisette."

### **Les étapes**

Les étapes mentionnées ci-dessous ne donnent qu'une idée générale des grandes lignes de la discussion. Comme une carte routière,

elles montrent la voie à suivre, mais sans indiquer les collines, les vallées, ni les accidents du terrain. Toutefois, elles indiquent la façon logique de progresser.

### **Reconnaître le problème**

- s'il n'y a pas de problème, pourquoi se réunir?
- convenir du sujet à discuter
- convenir que le sujet concerne bien le groupe

### **Examiner le problème**

- il faut définir le problème assez clairement pour qu'il puisse y avoir échange d'idées et de renseignements
- il faut comprendre la portée exacte du problème

### **Examiner les faits**

- il faut distinguer ce qui est concret de ce qui ne l'est pas
- discuter les problèmes à fond et systématiquement
- chercher les causes

### **Proposer des décisions provisoires**

- en se basant sur les faits présentés, quelles mesures peut-on prendre pour
- remédier aux problèmes?

### **Choisir les décisions appropriées**

- obtenez l'accord général quant à la méthode la plus satisfaisante de traiter les problèmes.

Après ces différentes étapes, l'animateur ne doit pas manquer de s'assurer que tous les membres du groupe sont satisfaits des décisions qui ont été prises.

### **Le secrétaire**

Nous parlerons plus loin de ce que l'animateur et les membres du groupe de discussion peuvent faire pour contribuer au déroulement

de la discussion, mais il faut tout d'abord mentionner une personne qui joue un rôle important. Il s'agit de la personne qui prend des notes, généralement appelée le secrétaire.

Le rôle du secrétaire est très important. Il est désigné soit avant la formation du groupe, soit au début de la séance et il note les points importants de la discussion.

Au cours de la séance, il peut rappeler au groupe les points qui ont été discutés, les suggestions qui ont été faites et les décisions qui ont été prises. A la fin de la séance, il peut résumer brièvement tout ce qui a été réalisé. Souvent, on peut lui demander de faire un rapport sur la discussion du groupe, soit de vive voix devant un auditoire lors d'une conférence plus importante, soit par écrit, et de résumer brièvement les conclusions auxquelles on est arrivé.

C'est pourquoi un groupe de discussion ne doit pas choisir son secrétaire au hasard (comme par exemple: "C'est la seule femme du groupe", ou bien: "Il a un crayon à la main").

Il faut rechercher des qualités déterminées, parmi lesquelles il faut citer:

- la capacité de distinguer les points importants d'une discussion
- la capacité de faire ressortir les attitudes et les opinions des membres du groupe
- le désir de remplir ces fonctions

### **Rappelez-vous ceci**

- une discussion sérieuse n'est pas le fruit du hasard
- la discussion doit suivre certaines étapes qu'il faut déterminer d'avance
- il est important que le groupe ait un bon secrétaire

## **L'ANIMATEUR D'UNE DISCUSSION**

'Ce que je suis, c'est un peu de chair animée du souffle vital, avec le rôle de chef.'

Marc Aurèle, Pensées 11.2

Nous essayons dans cette brochure de donner à l'animateur d'une discussion une idée de certaines choses qu'il peut faire pour aider

le groupe à prendre de bonnes décisions. Mais dans bien des cas, il s'agit de points techniques et nous ne désirons pas laisser de côté le rôle très important des qualités personnelles et du comportement de l'animateur.

L'animateur d'une discussion doit encourager tous les autres membres du groupe à exprimer leur opinion, tout en veillant à rester absolument impartial, ce qui souvent est loin d'être facile. Les animateurs sont souvent choisis en raison de leurs fortes opinions et de leur compétence à les exposer clairement.

## **Qualités personnelles**

Étudions maintenant quelques-unes des qualités que l'on recherche chez l'animateur d'une discussion. Il est rare, bien entendu, de les trouver toutes réunies chez une même personne. Toutefois, les points suivants peuvent contribuer à les définir. L'animateur doit être

### **aimable**

— quelqu'un qui suscite de la sympathie chez les membres du groupe

### **équitable mais ferme**

— neutre dans sa façon de présenter les choses

### **attentif à ce qui se dit**

— non seulement il écoute ce qui se dit, mais il cherche à comprendre ce que la personne cherche à dire

### **patient**

— il faut que les participants puissent comprendre clairement ce qui se dit, même si cela doit retarder la marche de la discussion. Ceux qui ne s'expriment pas avec facilité doivent avoir l'occasion de présenter leurs idées

### **lucide d'esprit**

— il doit pouvoir résumer et rattacher entre eux les divers points de vue



## **calme**

- l'animateur ne doit pas imposer ses opinions personnelles

## **sensible**

- il doit être conscient des sentiments des membres du groupe
- il doit avoir conscience du moment où les membres du groupe sont d'accord

## **pénétré de l'idée de la valeur des discussions**

- l'animateur doit être convaincu que la méthode du groupe de discussion est un moyen rationnel d'arriver à une décision

Voilà donc certaines des qualités personnelles de l'animateur d'une discussion au sein du groupe. Grâce à elles, il est prêt à jouer son rôle particulier. L'animateur d'une discussion peut faire beaucoup de choses pour aider le groupe à progresser en direction de l'objectif choisi et nous en parlerons bientôt. Mais n'oublions pas que la faculté de comprendre ce qu'on attend d'un animateur, dans une situation donnée, ne s'acquiert qu'avec l'expérience. Nous essayons ici de donner seulement des idées générales à ce sujet — nous ne saurions faire de vous un expert!

## **Le rôle de l'animateur**

Voici une liste de certaines choses que l'animateur d'une discussion peut faire pour aider le groupe à examiner le sujet de la discussion et à trouver des solutions.

### **il s'est renseigné sur le sujet**

- l'animateur doit apprendre tout ce qu'il peut sur le sujet avant la discussion. Pour recueillir les faits relatifs au sujet à discuter, il a recours à une variété de sources de renseignements — journaux, radio, télévision, etc. Si certains renseignements se rapportant à la discussion peuvent être facilement reproduits, il peut en faire remettre des copies aux membres du groupe. Si l'animateur peut communiquer avec les membres du groupe avant la discussion, il peut leur suggérer des textes utiles à lire.



## **il engage la discussion**

— le début d'une discussion en groupe doit faire l'objet d'une préparation spéciale, surtout si les participants ne se connaissent pas. Il existe plusieurs dangers possibles:

1) les participants risquent d'être hésitants à commencer à parler

2) la discussion risque de commencer en dehors du sujet

L'animateur peut faire plusieurs choses pour aider le groupe à partir du bon pied

1) Si le groupe est assez petit, il peut demander à chacun de se présenter.

2) Il peut demander aux participants d'énumérer les points principaux qu'ils désirent discuter.

3) Il peut préciser le sujet de façon que tous les participants comprennent clairement l'objet de la discussion.

## **il aide le groupe à tirer ses conclusions**

Il existe toute une variété d'objectifs différents à atteindre, entre autres —

— définir les problèmes et les besoins

— projeter des programmes

— évaluer des programmes

— soulever des questions auxquelles il faudra répondre plus tard

et bien d'autres encore. Mais quelle que soit la raison de son existence, le groupe de discussion doit suivre certaines étapes pour arriver à tirer ses conclusions. L'animateur d'une discussion est le guide du groupe pendant tout le déroulement de la discussion. Il voit le but à atteindre, il prévoit les pièges, il avertit le groupe quand celui-ci fait fausse route, enfin il assure la satisfaction de tous si le groupe atteint son but. Mais il doit sans cesse veiller à ne pas diriger la discussion — et si le groupe décide de s'engager dans une autre voie — ce n'est pas à lui de l'empêcher.

Au cours de la discussion, l'animateur a plusieurs tâches à remplir. Il serait impossible (et superflu) de les énumérer toutes, mais nous citerons les plus importantes d'entre elles:

- garder la discussion centrée sur le sujet
- encourager l'expression d'opinions personnelles
- s'assurer que le groupe comprend bien le sujet de la discussion
- encourager une bonne intelligence entre les membres

- faire un résumé de la discussion de temps à autre
- indiquer où et comment la discussion dévie du sujet
- aider à éviter les malentendus parmi les participants quand ils sont d'accord et quand ils ne le sont pas
- encourager l'application de méthodes systématiques et la présentation de faits précis
- fournir tous les renseignements possibles sur les sujets discutés
- indiquer quand il y a accord général

A la fin de la discussion, le meilleur signe qu'elle a été bien menée, c'est que la décision s'avère satisfaisante pour tous.

### **Rappelez-vous ceci**

- les qualités personnelles de l'animateur sont aussi importantes que ses actes
- le rôle de l'animateur est d'aider le groupe à prendre des décisions judicieuses et satisfaisantes

## **LE RÔLE DES MEMBRES**

'Quelles multitudes . . . dans la vallée du jugement!'

Joël 3:14

Ce sont les membres qui ont le rôle le plus important à jouer. La façon dont ils participent à la discussion et les tâches qu'ils accomplissent influent, en fin de compte, sur la décision qu'ils prennent. A la fin de cet exposé, vous trouverez un appendice énumérant ce qu'on appelle les RÔLES FONCTIONNELS et le COMPORTEMENT NON FONCTIONNEL des membres du groupe. On peut les classer en activités utiles et en activités inutiles des membres pour ce qui est d'aider le groupe à atteindre ses objectifs.

Nous ne traitons pas directement du comportement non fonctionnel des membres, mais on peut dire que ce comportement se manifeste habituellement lorsque les conditions que nous avons suggérées plus haut ne sont pas remplies.

- la température de la salle est trop élevée
- le sujet n'est pas intéressant
- le participant a l'impression que les idées sont sans valeur

Les rôles fonctionnels des membres sont ceux qui aident le groupe à atteindre ses objectifs et qui aident les membres du groupe à obtenir un sentiment de satisfaction. Parmi ces rôles importants, citons:

- définir clairement la question
- demander des renseignements
- donner des renseignements
- arbitrer
- évaluer les progrès de la discussion

Il est facile de voir que bon nombre de ces tâches sont les mêmes que celles qui incombent à l'animateur. C'est même là un des critères de l'efficacité du groupe — la mesure dans laquelle ses membres assument les diverses tâches de l'animateur. Tous les membres du groupe devraient être encouragés à partager les tâches de l'animateur de la discussion et à ne pas s'en remettre entièrement à lui.

Souvent, au cours de l'existence d'un groupe de discussion, différents membres du groupe remplissent des rôles différents. C'est pourquoi l'animateur doit toujours éviter de stéréotyper les membres du groupe. Mainte bonne suggestion a été négligée parce qu'on avait fait sentir aux membres que "tout ce que peut suggérer ce bouffon est peut-être amusant, mais pas très utile."

L'animateur doit donc considérer le groupe de discussion comme un "groupe de membres" et doit encourager ceux-ci à prendre des décisions satisfaisantes pour tous.

### **Rappelez-vous ceci**

- dans un groupe de discussion, ce sont les membres du groupe qui ont le rôle prédominant
- le rôle des membres change constamment, mais il faut les encourager à assumer un certain degré d'autorité
- le rôle de chef de discussion ne se donne pas, il ne peut que s'accepter

## **LES TECHNIQUES**

'Vous connaissez mes méthodes, Watson'

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Les mémoires de Sherlock Holmes

Traiter aussi brièvement des techniques des groupes de discussion, c'est friser l'échec. Ces techniques ne sont pas destinées à remplacer une discussion sérieuse, mais à être adoptées seulement dans des situations particulières. C'est pourquoi en énumérant les quelques techniques suivantes, nous vous conseillons vivement de ne les utiliser qu'à bon escient.

La liste suivante est loin d'être complète. Elle ne donne qu'un petit nombre de techniques qui peuvent être adoptées par un groupe de discussion et ces techniques ne sont pas traitées de façon approfondie.

### **Le vote**

Dans un groupe de discussion, le vote est une méthode nettement inférieure à celle de l'accord pratiquement unanime quand il s'agit de prendre une décision. Si une décision est prise par 6 voix contre 5, elle a causé une division du groupe, division qui aurait peut-être pu être évitée.

Au lieu d'une décision, un vote d'essai en vue de sonder l'opinion générale s'avère parfois utile pour poursuivre la discussion.

### **La conférence-choc**

La technique de conférence-choc s'avère souvent utile si l'on désire obtenir beaucoup d'idées quand il existe plusieurs solutions ou programmes pouvant résoudre un problème spécifique.

Selon cette méthode, on pose le problème et, en un temps donné (par exemple 4 minutes), les participants doivent réfléchir et donner toutes les solutions qui leur viennent à l'esprit. Pendant ces 4 minutes, il est interdit de discuter si une idée est bonne ou non. On fait une liste des idées présentées et cette liste constitue la base de la discussion ultérieure.

### **Les différents rôles**

Il existe de nombreuses variantes des différents rôles qui peuvent être adoptés dans un groupe de discussion. Si vous désirez obtenir de plus amples renseignements, vous trouverez, à la bibliothèque de votre localité, des livres et des articles traitant de ce sujet.

## **Discussion en groupes secondaires**

S'il faut discuter un point en détail et arriver à une conclusion ferme, on peut parfois diviser le groupe en petits groupes pendant un certain temps. Une fois les discussions terminées, ils présentent leurs conclusions au groupe général.

### **Auxiliaires visuels**

Il est très utile que le groupe ait un tableau noir ou des feuilles vierges de papier-journal à sa disposition.

Pour l'animateur de discussion qui désire se renseigner sur son rôle, il existe toute une variété de livres traitant des techniques de façon beaucoup plus approfondie. La bibliographie qui figure à la fin de cette brochure en énumère quelques-uns et les bibliothèques en offrent beaucoup d'autres.

### **Rappelez-vous ceci**

- les techniques ne sauraient remplacer une bonne discussion
- elles s'utilisent pour amplifier la discussion.

## **À LA FIN DE LA DISCUSSION**

"Ce n'est pas la fin. Ce n'est même pas le commencement de la fin. Mais c'est peut-être la fin du commencement!"

Winston Churchill

Etant donné qu'un groupe de discussion ne vit pas en vase clos, il faut que nous sachions à quelles fins les conclusions du groupe seront utilisées. Si ces conclusions étaient valables, elles devraient donc être utiles à quelque chose.

Le groupe de discussion dérive habituellement d'un groupe de débat plus important et il est responsable envers ce groupe. Selon ce que l'on a demandé, cette responsabilité peut jouer un rôle important dans la discussion.

Parfois, on demande à ces groupes de recommander des programmes et des solutions. Dans ce cas, le groupe doit prendre le temps voulu pour décider des recommandations à faire. Sinon, les



membres du groupe ont souvent la surprise d'entendre leur représentant faire un rapport qui ne ressemble en rien à ce qui s'est dit au cours de la discussion.

Si le groupe doit préparer des questions à poser au cours d'une séance plus importante, il faut que les membres conviennent des questions à poser et de l'ordre dans lequel elles doivent être posées. Et si le temps manque pour répondre à toutes les questions, les plus importantes auront du moins été posées.

Si possible, il faut donner un rapport des débats aux membres du groupe dès que possible après la réunion. Ce rapport leur rappellera ce qui s'est passé au cours de la discussion, ainsi que ce qu'il faudra faire ultérieurement.

Si le groupe a convenu de prendre d'autres mesures, il faut en confier la responsabilité à certains membres du groupe avant la fin de la réunion. Sinon, il sera beaucoup plus difficile d'inciter quelqu'un à agir, car il se souviendra moins bien de ce qu'il doit faire et il sera moins disposé à s'engager.

### **Rappelez-vous ceci**

- avant que la séance soit levée, il faut que les décisions relatives aux mesures futures soient prises et que tous les participants les comprennent bien.

## **CONCLUSION**

Nous n'avons fait qu'effleurer le sujet du groupe de discussion et de votre rôle d'animateur. Sans vouloir développer davantage le sujet, nous désirons cependant le résumer en disant que l'animateur d'une discussion doit être en mesure d'acquérir les trois qualités suivantes:

connaissance  
expérience  
discernement

Nous avons essayé, dans cet exposé, de vous donner l'occasion d'acquérir quelques *connaissances* sur la façon de procéder du groupe et sur la façon de diriger le groupe. Cet exposé n'a pas la prétention d'être complet, mais nous espérons que vous aurez appris quelque chose qui vous sera utile dans votre groupe de discussion.



C'est en participant à des discussions que vous acquérez *l'expérience* nécessaire pour aider les membres du groupe à prendre des décisions satisfaisantes.

En ce qui concerne le *discernement*, vous ne pouvez l'acquérir que par vos efforts personnels. Vous devez avoir confiance dans les membres du groupe et dans leurs capacités de prendre des décisions judicieuses au moyen de la discussion en groupe. Sans discernement, tout le reste ne sert à rien.

Nous avons commencé en vous donnant un avertissement — nous finirons de même. Cette brochure n'est qu'un outil entre vos mains. Si, pour aider les membres du groupe à atteindre leurs objectifs, on vous demande de remplir un rôle différent de celui que nous décrivons ici, alors ne tenez pas compte de cette brochure. Ce qu'elle dit n'est pas parole d'évangile.

## **APPENDICE**

### **RÔLES FONCTIONNELS**

**ET**

### **COMPORTEMENT NON FONCTIONNEL**

Traduction de  
ADULT LEADERSHIP "tool kit",  
janvier 1953

L'ADULT LEADERSHIP  
est une publication de  
l'Adult Education Association  
of the U.S.A.

Voici un glossaire de quelques-uns des *rôles fonctionnels* les plus importants des membres du groupe.

**Fonctions essentielles** qu'un animateur de discussion doit pouvoir remplir:

Engager les activités: proposer des solutions; suggérer de nouvelles idées, de nouvelles définitions du problème, une nouvelle façon d'aborder le problème ou le présenter sous une autre forme.

Chercher à obtenir des renseignements: demander de préciser les suggestions, demander les renseignements ou des faits supplémentaires.

Chercher à obtenir des opinions: demander aux membres du groupe d'exprimer leurs sentiments sur un point particulier, chercher à préciser les valeurs, tâcher d'obtenir des suggestions ou des idées.

Donner des renseignements: présenter des faits ou des généralisations pour illustrer un point, établir un rapport entre une expérience personnelle et le problème du groupe.

Donner son opinion: donner son opinion ou son avis concernant une suggestion ou une suggestion parmi plusieurs surtout au point de vue de sa valeur et non des faits sur lesquels elle repose.

Entrer dans les détails: préciser, donner des exemples ou expliquer le sens de certaines déclarations, essayer d'imaginer les résultats que pourrait donner une proposition si on l'adoptait.

Coordonner: démontrer les rapports qui existent entre diverses idées et suggestions, essayer de réunir idées et suggestions, essayer d'associer les activités de divers groupes secondaires ou de divers membres.

Résumer: associer des idées ou des suggestions qui ont un rapport entre elles, réexposer les suggestions après leur discussion par le groupe.

Essayer de juger si les suggestions sont réalisables: appliquer les suggestions à des situations réelles, examiner le caractère pratique des idées présentées et la possibilité de les réaliser, évaluer à l'avance les décisions.

### **Fonctions essentielles pour entretenir et renforcer les activités du groupe**

Encourager: être aimable, chaleureux, sensible aux réactions des autres, faire l'éloge des autres et de leurs idées, être d'accord avec les contributions des autres et les accepter.

Permettre à tous de se faire entendre: essayer de permettre à un autre membre de faire une contribution au groupe en disant par exemple: "Jacques n'a encore rien dit", ou en suggérant que chaque membre exprime ses vues dans un temps limité, de façon que tous aient l'occasion de parler.

Etablir des normes: présenter au groupe les normes d'après lesquelles il choisirait ses membres et ses méthodes ou évaluerait des décisions; rappeler au groupe d'éviter de prendre des décisions qui seraient incompatibles avec les normes du groupe.

Suivre le mouvement général: adopter les décisions du groupe, accepter en quelque sorte passivement les vues des autres, servir d'auditoire pendant les discussions du groupe et quand les décisions sont prises.

Exprimer les sentiments du groupe: résumer les sentiments apparents du groupe, décrire les réactions du groupe aux idées présentées et aux solutions envisagées.

### **Fonctions générales de l'animateur de groupe**

Evaluer: comparer les décisions ou les réalisations du groupe avec les normes du groupe, et les évaluer par rapport aux objectifs.

Diagnostics: déterminer d'où proviennent les difficultés, décider des mesures appropriées à prendre, reconnaître les principaux obstacles aux progrès.

Examiner l'esprit d'unanimité du groupe:	sonder l'opinion du groupe pour se rendre compte s'il existe un accord au sujet d'une décision quelconque.
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Agir en médiateur:	harmoniser et concilier les divergences d'opinion, proposer des solutions accommodantes.
--------------------	--

Apaiser les esprits:	dissiper les sentiments négatifs par des paroles conciliantes, reporter une situation tendue dans un contexte plus large.
----------------------	---

Du temps en temps — peut-être plus souvent qu'on n'aimerait l'admettre — les participants se comportent de façon **INOPPORTUNE** qui, loin d'être utile, nuit parfois au groupe et à ce qu'il essaie d'accomplir. Nous décrivons ci-dessous quelques-uns de ces comportements les plus courants.

Remarque:	Dans ce cas, il faut se garder contre la tendance à condamner toute personne (soi-même ou un autre) ayant un tel comportement. Il vaut mieux considérer un comportement de ce genre comme un symptôme que tout n'est pas parfait au sein du groupe et qu'il ne parvient pas à satisfaire les désirs individuels des membres. De plus, il faut bien comprendre que, probablement, chacun interprétera à sa façon un comportement de ce genre. Par exemple, une attitude qu'une personne interprétera comme visant à faire obstacle, pourrait paraître à une autre comme un effort nécessaire pour "essayer de juger si la suggestion est réalisable".
-----------	--

### **Comportements inopportuns**

Attitude agressive:	chercher à faire impression en critiquant ou en blâmant les autres, faire preuve d'hostilité contre le groupe ou contre un membre du groupe, humilier les autres.
---------------------	---

Faire obstacle:	entraver les progrès de la discussion en s'éloignant du sujet, en mentionnant une expérience personnelle n'ayant aucun rapport avec le problème, trop discuter d'un certain point, rejeter des idées sans les examiner.
-----------------	---

Exprimer des points de vue personnels:	s'attarder sur des opinions personnelles, exprimer des sentiments ou des points de vue personnels qui s'éloignent des objectifs du groupe.
Entrer en rivalité avec les autres:	rivaliser avec les autres pour soumettre la meilleure idée, parler le plus, jouer le plus grand nombre de rôles, gagner la faveur de l'animateur.
Chercher à attirer l'attention du groupe:	essayer d'amener d'autres membres du groupe à COMPATIR à des problèmes ou à des revers personnels, se lamenter sur son sort ou dénigrer ses idées personnelles afin d'obtenir le soutien des autres.
Plaider sa cause outre mesure:	présenter ou soutenir des suggestions se rapportant à des intérêts ou à des principes personnels, intriguer.
Chahuter:	faire le bouffon, plaisanter, contrefaire quelqu'un, interrompre les progrès du groupe.
Faire preuve d'une originalité exagérée:	essayer d'attirer l'attention sur soi en parlant trop et trop fort, en présentant des idées immodérées en ayant un comportement insolite.
Se désintéresser:	avoir une attitude indifférente ou passive, avoir recours à trop de formalités, rêvasser, gribouiller, chuchoter avec d'autres, s'écarter du sujet.



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# Discussion Leaders' Handbook



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## FOREWORD

This booklet is intended as a guide for those who find themselves in the role of discussion leaders and are not quite sure how to fulfill the responsibilities of this role. It contains nothing that is not already found elsewhere and it does not pretend to go to any great depth.

There are several things that a discussion leader can do to help a group achieve a happy ending, but perhaps the most significant variable for success is the attitude of the discussion leader himself. He must be genuinely concerned with helping other people, and convinced that this discussion is one way of achieving this goal.

Despite the length of this booklet, the discussion leader's task is not as difficult as it may seem. If the satisfaction of the group members and the achievement of the group's objectives are foremost in the leader's mind, the rest will fall into place. It is helpful to remember that most discussion leaders are selected because they have already shown a capability of fulfilling the task at hand.

One other thing to keep in mind is that a discussion group always has a specific task at hand — achieving solid conclusions on a particular subject in a specific period of time. It is not a sensitivity group, nor is it a platform for one particular point of view.

Good luck in your new responsibilities — may your conclusions be valid and the participants satisfied.

# **A HANDBOOK FOR DISCUSSION LEADERS**

## **THE DISCUSSION GROUP**

**'Truth is never pure, and rarely simple'**

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act I

In the 20th century we have seen major changes come about in our knowledge of how and why people learn as well as a major redefinition of what learning is. We have found, for instance, that people learn more quickly when they are personally involved in the process of learning and when they feel that the subject vitally affects them. Participation has become the keyword.

Out of this concept of participatory learning several methods of providing a learning experience have evolved. One of these – the discussion group – is the one which we are going to examine in fuller detail. Even more specifically, we are going to look at your role, as discussion leader, in helping the participants achieve their own objectives.

Unfortunately, we must start out with warnings. The discussion group has become a popular, and, in many cases, a successful method of achieving the goals set out for it. So has aspirin. And like aspirin the discussion group is specific in its aim and completely inadequate for other problems. We would not use aspirin to treat a broken leg, nor should we use the discussion group in the place of those better ways to transmit specific information and enhance learning.

Also, it must be borne in mind that the discussion technique is just that, a technique. The discussion group is not an end in itself but

merely a method to help people learn. However, a good discussion group can help people to expand their horizons and achieve a sense of personal satisfaction. We hope to give you some of the tools necessary to achieve this goal.

The discussion group is a laboratory for the exchange of ideas for all persons in the group. It is, therefore, used when the subject to be discussed is one in which all the participants have interest, knowledge and feelings. Participants pool ideas, knowledge and experience to arrive at group decisions.

When this common background is not present, the group is in danger of pooling its ignorance. If only a limited number of persons have the necessary knowledge, the lecture, forum or panel would probably be a better or more appropriate method of transmitting it.

The topic should also be relevant to members of the group to ensure a high degree of group participation. If several discussion groups are provided to deal with specific questions around a larger topic, participants will have an opportunity to select the one most pertinent to themselves. For example, the organizers of a horticultural conference could set up groups to deal with a variety of sub-topics such as perennial plants, trees, and African violets.

The topic cannot be too limited or discussion will be stilted and inhibited as the group struggles to expand its discussion to fill the time available. On the other hand, it must be specific enough that some decisions can be reached. If the topic is too broad a sense of frustration can set in as the group becomes overwhelmed by the magnitude of it all.

Organizers should also make sure that the time set aside for the discussion groups is appropriate to the subject to be covered. Too little time often means that all participants can't have their say, conclusions reached are hasty and based on inadequate discussion and people feel rushed. If the period is too long, on the other hand, the discussion may limp and boredom may quickly set in.

**Remember**

- discussion groups are a technique
- the topic should be relevant and suitable for discussion
- the time set aside should be adequate for thorough discussion



## THE SETTING

'This must my comforts be  
The sun that warms you here shall shine on me'  
Richard II, Act I, Scene iii

If we may paraphrase Shakespeare, we may truly say of the discussion leader 'one man in his time plays many parts'. He directs the flow of discussion, introduces facts, involves people, and summarizes. Too often though he neglects one important aspect that, when lacking, can effectively destroy the group – the physical and emotional comfort of the members themselves.

### Physical Comfort

When we refer to physical comfort we are talking about those conditions which enable a person to be able to concentrate on the subject at hand, instead of continually trying to become more comfortable. The following are some of the questions a leader should consider before the session starts:

- . Is the room adequately ventilated?
- . Is the temperature right?
- . Is there good lighting?
- . Are the chairs comfortable?
- . If smoking is allowed, are ashtrays provided?
- . Can all members be seated in such a way that they can see each other without turning around?

The last question is very important because for a free and easy interchange within a group, people must be able to see one another. If they cannot, barriers to effective communication are set up.

### Emotional Comfort

Another element that is often omitted in a discussion of comfort in discussion groups is that of the emotional setting. It is here that the leader has a definite and positive role to play while the discussion group is underway. If this is ignored, no amount of expertise can make the discussion group achieve its objectives.

For a member to participate fully in a discussion group he must feel that he, and his comments, have some worth to the total group. This feeling is developed right from the beginning when he is welcomed into the group and introductions are made. He should not be left to sink or swim, but should be made to feel that he will be an important part of the group's life. The atmosphere should be

one in which participants feel free to say what they feel about the subject under discussion. They must know that disagreements with their ideas, is not a personal attack.

**Remember**

comfort is not only physical, it is also emotional.

## GROUP PROCESS

'And he smiled a kind of sickly smile, and curled upon the floor  
And the subsequent proceedings interested him no more'.

Bret Harte, *The Society upon the Stanislaus*

It is vital that we recognize the fact that discussion groups usually do not arrive at a decision by chance. It begins at the beginning and ends at the end by following a series of steps that are common to almost all groups. It is no accident when sound decisions are reached.

The steps are not always clearly defined but the discussion leader should always be aware of where the group is and where it is going. It is his task to help the group define its objectives and then to reach them. He is much like a hired fishing guide saying things like 'So you want bass, trout or pike?' 'How long are you prepared to spend at it?' 'How hard do you want to work?' 'Perhaps you should cast over there.' 'You reel it in and I'll help you net it'.

### Group Stages

The steps mentioned below are merely indicative of the general stages a group passes through. Like a road map they show the route that is being followed but not the hills and valleys or other terrain. However, they do show a logical pattern of progression.

### **Recognize the Problem**

- if a problem does not exist, why bother?
- agree on what is to be discussed
- agree that it is relevant to the group

### **Examine the Problem**

- the problem should be defined clearly enough to be able to exchange ideas and information
- the scope of the problem should be understood

### **Look at the Facts**

- What is real and what is fiction?
- discuss problems thoroughly and systematically
- diagnose why problems occur

### **Propose Tentative Decisions**

- based on the facts brought forward, what steps can be taken to remedy the problems

### **Select Suitable Decisions**

- get general agreement on the most appropriate method of dealing with the problems

After this process has been followed and completed, the leader should take time to find out if all persons are satisfied with the decisions that have been reached.

### **The Recorder**

Although later in this pamphlet we will be talking about the specific things the discussion leader and the members can do to help the group move along, there is one important person who should be mentioned. This is the recorder or for lack of a better word, the note taker.

The recorder has a very important role to play in the group. Appointed either before the group is formed or at the beginning of the session he serves as the historian — noting the important points of the discussion.

At various times during the session, he can remind the group of what has been discussed, what suggestions have been made and what decisions have been reached. At the end of the session he can briefly summarize what has happened. Often he may be called upon to give a report on a group's discussion either to a larger conference or in writing and to summarize its conclusions.

Thus a group should not pick a recorder casually (like ‘She’s the only woman here’ or ‘He has a pencil in his hand’) but should look for some specific qualities. These would include

- an ability to select important points of discussion
- an ability to accurately reflect the feelings and opinions of the group
- a willingness to do the job

### **Remember**

- a sound discussion is no accident
- a discussion group passes through certain stages and they should be recognized
- a good recorder is important to the group

## **THE DISCUSSION LEADER**

‘Whatever this is that I am, it is a little  
flesh and breath, and the ruling part’

Marcus Aurelius Antonius *Meditations* II.2

In these pages we are attempting to give you, the discussion leader, an idea of some of the things that you might do to help the group arrive at sound decisions. However, in many cases these are technical points and we do not wish to ignore the very important role played by the personal qualities and behavior of the leader.

The discussion leader must work in such a way that he encourages all the other members to express their opinions while remaining studiously neutral himself. This is often a very difficult assignment. Leaders are often selected because they hold strong opinions and have the ability to articulate them.

### **Personal Qualities**

It behooves us now to look at some of the qualities desirable in a

discussion leader. It is indeed a rare man who possesses all these qualities to their fullest extent. However, these points can be used to frame a picture of such a person. He is

#### **Friendly**

- the type of person group members will respond to

#### **Fair but firm**

- neutral in approach

#### **An Attentive Listener**

- hearing not only the words that are spoken but what the speaker is really trying to say

#### **Patient**

- participants must be allowed to clearly understand what is being said even if it slows down the progress of the group and those who are not articulate must be allowed to state their ideas

#### **Clear Thinking**

- has the ability to summarize and correlate the various points of view

#### **Unaggressive**

- the leader does not push his own opinions

#### **Sensitive**

- must be aware of the feeling of group members
- should be aware when group consensus is reached

#### **Aware of the Value of Discussion**

- the leader should be confident that the group process is a sound way to reach a decision

These then are some of the personal qualities that a discussion leader brings to the group. He is now ready to begin functioning in the particular role he has accepted. There are many things that a discussion leader can do to help the group move along towards its objective and we will deal with these next. However, it should be kept in mind that the ability to sense what is required of the leader in a certain situation comes basically through experience. We are only attempting to provide the framework for you, not make you an expert.



## **The Role of the Leader**

The following are some of the things a discussion leader can do to help the group in its examination of the topic and development of solutions.

### **Comes Prepared**

— the leader should learn as much as possible about the subject to be discussed before the group starts. This implies the gathering of facts from a variety of sources — newspapers, radio and TV, press, etc. If there is anything really pertinent to the group discussion that can be readily reproduced, copies might be given to the members. The leader, if he has any way of contacting the members beforehand, might suggest suitable readings.

### **Gets Discussion Started**

— the beginning of a discussion group must be very carefully planned, especially if the participants are unknown to each other. There are two potential dangers:

- 1) that people may be hesitant about starting to talk
- 2) that discussion starts off topic

There are several things that a leader can do to help the group get off the ground

- 1) If the group is small enough he can have everyone introduce himself.
- 2) Have the participants list the major points they wish to discuss.
- 3) Clarify the topic so that all the participants have a clear idea of what is to be discussed.

### **Helps Group Reach Conclusions**

There are a variety of different purposes for discussion groups:

- defining problems and needs
- planning programs
- evaluating programs
- raising questions to be answered later

and a vast number of other purposes. No matter what the reason for its existence, however, a discussion group follows a series of steps to reach its conclusion. The discussion leader acts as a guide for the group as it moves through this process. He sees the goal, anticipates pitfalls, warns when the wrong trail is taken, and achieves satisfaction when the group achieves its target. He must always be careful though that he does not direct the discussion and if the group decides it wants to go somewhere else — so be it!



The leader performs numerous tasks throughout the discussion. It would be impossible (and unnecessary) to enumerate them all but there are several that are crucial. These include:

- . keeping group on topic
- . encouraging individual opinions
- . making sure that the group has a clear understanding of discussion
- . encouraging friendly understanding
- . summarizing occasionally
- . indicating when and how discussion strays
- . helping avoid misunderstanding among participants where they agree and where they disagree
- . encouraging systematic methods and the use of facts
- . providing whatever information he can about the topics being discussed
- . indicating when agreement has been reached

When all is said and done the best indication of a job well done is a decision reached that provides satisfaction for all the members of the group.

#### **Remember**

- . the personal qualities of a leader are as important as what he does
- . the leader's role is to help the group achieve sound and satisfying conclusions

## **MEMBERS' ROLES**

'Multitudes in the Valley of Decision'

Bible, Joel 3:14

Members have the most important roles to play in a discussion group. The way they participate and the tasks they perform will

ultimately effect the decision that they reach. At the end of this paper is an appendix listing what are called the FUNCTIONAL ROLES and NON-FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR of group members. These may be categorized as helpful and non-helpful activities of members in aiding the group to reach its objectives.

Although we are not dealing with members' non-functional behaviour directly, it can be said that this usually occurs because the conditions suggested earlier were not met.

- the room is too hot
- the topic is of no interest
- the participant has been made to feel that his ideas have no value.

The functional roles that a member plays are those that help the group achieve its objectives and help the group members achieve a feeling of satisfaction. Among the major such roles are:

- stating the issue clearly
- asking for information
- giving information
- arbitrating
- evaluating progress

As can readily be seen many of the tasks are the same as those of the leader. Indeed, this is one key to the measurement of a group's effectiveness – the degree to which members assume the various tasks of leadership. The group should be encouraged to share this leadership amongst all members and not become dependent upon the assigned discussion leader.

At various times in the life of a discussion group different members will play different roles. Thus, the leader should always steer clear of stereo-typing the group members. Many a good suggestion has been overlooked because the members feel that 'anything that comes from that buffoon may be funny but it's not helpful'.

The leader then should regard the discussion group as a "members' group" and encourage them to use it to achieve satisfaction.

## **Remember**

- the most important people in a discussion group are the members
- the roles of members are ever changing but they should be encouraged to take on leadership
- leadership cannot be given, it is only accepted

## **TECHNIQUES**

‘You know my methods, Watson’

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*

To deal with discussion group techniques in less than a full book is to court disaster. They are not intended as substitutes for full and open discussion but only used in specific situations. Thus when listing several of these we can only add the warning – ‘handle with caution’.

The following list is not a complete one. It touches only on a few of the possible techniques that can be used in a discussion group and even then are only lightly dealt with.

### **Voting**

A vote in a discussion group runs a far distant second to reaching a consensus as a way of making a decision. A decision based on a 6-5 ratio has split a group, perhaps needlessly.

A straw vote which indicates opinion and not a decision can sometimes be helpful to further discussion.

### **Brainstorming**

The technique of brainstorming is often useful if one wishes to get out a lot of ideas when there are many possible solutions or programs for a specific problem.

With this method the problem is posed and participants are given a specified amount of time (e.g. 4 minutes) to come out with all the

solutions they can think of. During this time no discussion is permitted on whether or not an idea is good or bad. The ideas are listed and form the basis for the discussion which follows.

### **Role Playing**

There are many variations of role playing that can be used in a discussion group. If you are interested in further information, your local library should have books and articles that deal with this topic.

### **Sub-Group Discussion**

If there is one point that is to be discussed in detail and a definite conclusion drawn it is sometimes possible to split up the discussion group into smaller units for a limited period of time. After this is finished they report back to the larger discussion group.

### **Visual Aids**

It is very helpful if a blackboard or sheets of newsprint are available for the group use.

If a discussion leader is interested in learning about his craft there are a variety of books on the subject that deal much more extensively with techniques. The bibliography to this booklet lists some and the library will have many more.

#### **Remember**

- . techniques are no substitute for sound discussion
- . they are used to add an extra dimension

### **AT THE END**

'This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning'.

Winston Churchill

Since a discussion group does not exist in a vacuum it is necessary that we know to what end the conclusions of the group will be

used. If these conclusions were valid then they must be of some use.

A discussion group has usually been spun off of a larger forum and has to report to this group. Depending on what has been requested of the group, this can be an important part of the discussion.

Sometimes groups are asked to bring in recommended programs or solutions. If this is the case, time should be taken in the group to get agreement as to what these recommendations are to be and what is to be said. Unless this is done the group is often surprised to hear their representative give a report that sounds nothing like what they remember went on.

If the group has been asked to come up with questions to be used in the larger session they should agree on what questions are to be asked and in what order. Then if time runs out before all the questions have been answered the most important ones will have been asked.

If at all possible a report of the proceedings of the group should be given to the members as soon as possible after the meeting is over. It will serve to refresh their memory of what went on and to remind them of further action to be taken.

If the group has agreed to take further action then some members should be assigned the necessary responsibilities before the meeting ends. Otherwise, it becomes much more difficult to get people to take action because it is not as fresh in their mind and the degree of commitment to decisions decreases.

### **Remember**

- agreements as to future action should be reached and understood by all participants before the group adjourns.

## **CONCLUSION**

We have briefly glanced at the discussion group and your role as its leader. Without wishing to get more involved in the limited space



we have available perhaps we should sum up by saying that the discussion leader has to be in a position to acquire three things:

knowledge  
experience  
understanding

In this paper we have tried to provide an opportunity for you to gain some **knowledge** of the group process and group leadership techniques. It is by no means complete but we hope that you have learned something that will be helpful to you in your discussion group.

As you become involved in discussions you will gain the **experience** in helping people to achieve effective group decisions.

**Understanding** can only come about through your own effort. You must believe in people and in their ability to achieve sound decisions through the discussion group process. If this is not acquired all the rest is game playing.

We started with a warning, now let us end with one. This booklet is merely a tool and if it appears you are going to be called upon to play a different role than the one described herein to help the group members achieve their objectives then the book goes out the window. This is not intended to be your bible.



## **APPENDIX**

### **FUNCTIONAL ROLES AND NON-FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR**

Reprinted from ADULT LEADERSHIP  
'tool kit' of January 1953

ADULT LEADERSHIP  
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U.S.A.

Here is a glossary of some of the most essential **functional roles** of group members.

**Task Roles** (functions required in selecting and carrying out a group task)

Initiating activity:	proposing solutions; suggesting new ideas, new definitions of the problem, new attack on problem or new organization of material.
Seeking information:	asking for clarification of suggestions, requesting additional information or facts.
Seeking opinion:	looking for an expression of feeling about something from the members, seeking clarification of values, or suggestions or ideas.
Giving information:	offering facts or generalizations, relating one's own experience to group problem to illustrate a point.
Giving opinion:	stating an opinion or belief concerning a suggestion or one of several suggestions, particularly concerning its value rather than its factual basis.
Elaborating:	clarifying, giving examples or developing meanings, trying to envision how a proposal might work out if adopted.
Co-ordinating:	showing relationships among various ideas or suggestions, trying to pull ideas and suggestions together, trying to draw together activities of various sub-groups or members.
Summarizing:	pulling together related ideas or suggestions, re-stating suggestions after the group has discussed them.

Testing feasibility: making application of suggestions to real situations, examining practicality and workability of ideas, pre-evaluating decisions.

**Group Building and Maintenance Roles** (functions required in strengthening and maintaining group life and activities)

Encouraging: being friendly, warm, responsive to others, praising others and their ideas, agreeing with and accepting contributions of others.

Gate keeping: trying to make it possible for another member to make a contribution to the group by saying, 'We haven't heard anything from Jim, yet,' or suggesting limited talking time for everyone so that all will have a chance to be heard.

Standard setting: expressing standards for the group to use in choosing its content or procedures, or in evaluating its decisions; reminding the group to avoid decisions which conflict with group standards.

Following: going along with the decisions of the group, somewhat passively accepting ideas of others, serving as audience during group discussions and decision-making.

Expressing group feelings: summarizing what the group feeling is sensed to be, describing reactions of the group to ideas or solutions.

**Both Group Task and Group Maintenance Roles**

Evaluating: submitting group decisions or accomplishments to comparison with group standards, measuring accomplishments against goals.

Diagnosing:	determining sources of difficulties, appropriate steps to take next, the main blocks to progress.
Testing for consensus:	tentatively asking for group opinions in order to find out if the group is nearing consensus on a decision, sending up trial balloons to test group opinions.
Mediating:	harmonizing, conciliating differences in points of view, making compromise solutions.
Relieving tension:	draining off negative feeling by testing or pouring oil on troubled waters, putting a tense situation in a wider context.

From time to time – more often perhaps than anyone likes to admit – people behave in NON-FUNCTIONAL ways that do not help and sometimes actually harm the group and the work it is trying to do. Some of the more common types of non-functional behaviour are described below.

Note: In using a classification like the one above, people need to guard against the tendency to blame any person (whether themselves or another) who falls into “non-functional” behaviour. It is more useful to regard such behaviour as a symptom that all is not well with the group’s ability to satisfy individual needs through group-centred activity. Further, people need to be alert to the fact that each person is likely to interpret such behaviour differently. For example, what appears as “blocking” to one person may appear to another as a needed effort to “test feasibility”.

## Types of Non-functional Behaviour

Being aggressive:	working for status by criticizing or blaming others, showing hostility against the group or some individual, deflating the ego or status of others.
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Blocking:	interfering with the progress of the group by going off on a tangent, citing personal experiences unrelated to the problem arguing too much on a point, rejecting ideas without consideration.
Self-confessing:	using the group as a sounding board, expressing personal, non-group-oriented feelings or points of view.
Competing:	vying with others to produce the best idea, talk the most, play the most roles, gain favour with the leader.
Seeking sympathy:	trying to induce other group members TO BE SYMPATHETIC to one's problems or misfortunes, deploring one's own situation or disparaging one's own ideas to gain support.
Special pleading:	introducing or supporting suggestions related to one's own pet concerns or philosophies, lobbying.
Horsing around:	clowning, joking, mimicking, disrupting the work of the group.
Seeking recognition:	attempting to call attention to one's self by loud or excessive talking, extreme ideas, unusual behaviour.
Withdrawing:	acting indifferent or passive, resorting to excessive formality, daydreaming, doodling, whispering to others, wandering from the subject.

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So You Want to Help People







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# Discussion Leaders' Handbook

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# Discussion Leaders' Handbook

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## FOREWORD

This booklet is intended as a guide for those who find themselves in the role of discussion leaders and are not quite sure how to fulfill the responsibilities of this role. It contains nothing that is not already found elsewhere and it does not pretend to go to any great depth.

There are several things that a discussion leader can do to help a group achieve a happy ending, but perhaps the most significant variable for success is the attitude of the discussion leader himself. He must be genuinely concerned with helping other people, and convinced that this discussion is one way of achieving this goal.

Despite the length of this booklet, the discussion leader's task is not as difficult as it may seem. If the satisfaction of the group members and the achievement of the group's objectives are foremost in the leader's mind, the rest will fall into place. It is helpful to remember that most discussion leaders are selected because they have already shown a capability of fulfilling the task at hand.

One other thing to keep in mind is that a discussion group always has a specific task at hand — achieving solid conclusions on a particular subject in a specific period of time. It is not a sensitivity group, nor is it a platform for one particular point of view.

Good luck in your new responsibilities — may your conclusions be valid and the participants satisfied.

# **A HANDBOOK FOR DISCUSSION LEADERS**

## **THE DISCUSSION GROUP**

**'Truth is never pure, and rarely simple'**

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act I

In the 20th century we have seen major changes come about in our knowledge of how and why people learn as well as a major redefinition of what learning is. We have found, for instance, that people learn more quickly when they are personally involved in the process of learning and when they feel that the subject vitally affects them. Participation has become the keyword.

Out of this concept of participatory learning several methods of providing a learning experience have evolved. One of these – the discussion group – is the one which we are going to examine in fuller detail. Even more specifically, we are going to look at your role, as discussion leader, in helping the participants achieve their own objectives.

Unfortunately, we must start out with warnings. The discussion group has become a popular, and, in many cases, a successful method of achieving the goals set out for it. So has aspirin. And like aspirin the discussion group is specific in its aim and completely inadequate for other problems. We would not use aspirin to treat a broken leg, nor should we use the discussion group in the place of those better ways to transmit specific information and enhance learning.

Also, it must be borne in mind that the discussion technique is just that, a technique. The discussion group is not an end in itself but

merely a method to help people learn. However, a good discussion group can help people to expand their horizons and achieve a sense of personal satisfaction. We hope to give you some of the tools necessary to achieve this goal.

The discussion group is a laboratory for the exchange of ideas for all persons in the group. It is, therefore, used when the subject to be discussed is one in which all the participants have interest, knowledge and feelings. Participants pool ideas, knowledge and experience to arrive at group decisions.

When this common background is not present, the group is in danger of pooling its ignorance. If only a limited number of persons have the necessary knowledge, the lecture, forum or panel would probably be a better or more appropriate method of transmitting it.

The topic should also be relevant to members of the group to ensure a high degree of group participation. If several discussion groups are provided to deal with specific questions around a larger topic, participants will have an opportunity to select the one most pertinent to themselves. For example, the organizers of a horticultural conference could set up groups to deal with a variety of sub-topics such as perennial plants, trees, and African violets.

The topic cannot be too limited or discussion will be stilted and inhibited as the group struggles to expand its discussion to fill the time available. On the other hand, it must be specific enough that some decisions can be reached. If the topic is too broad a sense of frustration can set in as the group becomes overwhelmed by the magnitude of it all.

Organizers should also make sure that the time set aside for the discussion groups is appropriate to the subject to be covered. Too little time often means that all participants can't have their say, conclusions reached are hasty and based on inadequate discussion and people feel rushed. If the period is too long, on the other hand, the discussion may limp and boredom may quickly set in.

**Remember**

- . discussion groups are a technique
- . the topic should be relevant and suitable for discussion
- . the time set aside should be adequate for thorough discussion

## THE SETTING

'This must my comforts be  
The sun that warms you here shall shine on me'  
Richard II, Act I, Scene iii

If we may paraphrase Shakespeare, we may truly say of the discussion leader 'one man in his time plays many parts'. He directs the flow of discussion, introduces facts, involves people, and summarizes. Too often though he neglects one important aspect that, when lacking, can effectively destroy the group – the physical and emotional comfort of the members themselves.

### Physical Comfort

When we refer to physical comfort we are talking about those conditions which enable a person to be able to concentrate on the subject at hand, instead of continually trying to become more comfortable. The following are some of the questions a leader should consider before the session starts:

- . Is the room adequately ventilated?
- . Is the temperature right?
- . Is there good lighting?
- . Are the chairs comfortable?
- . If smoking is allowed, are ashtrays provided?
- . Can all members be seated in such a way that they can see each other without turning around?

The last question is very important because for a free and easy interchange within a group, people must be able to see one another. If they cannot, barriers to effective communication are set up.

### Emotional Comfort

Another element that is often omitted in a discussion of comfort in discussion groups is that of the emotional setting. It is here that the leader has a definite and positive role to play while the discussion group is underway. If this is ignored, no amount of expertise can make the discussion group achieve its objectives.

For a member to participate fully in a discussion group he must feel that he, and his comments, have some worth to the total group. This feeling is developed right from the beginning when he is welcomed into the group and introductions are made. He should not be left to sink or swim, but should be made to feel that he will be an important part of the group's life. The atmosphere should be



one in which participants feel free to say what they feel about the subject under discussion. They must know that disagreements with their ideas, is not a personal attack.

**Remember**

comfort is not only physical, it is also emotional.

## **GROUP PROCESS**

'And he smiled a kind of sickly smile, and curled upon the floor  
And the subsequent proceedings interested him no more'.

Bret Harte, *The Society upon the Stanislaus*

It is vital that we recognize the fact that discussion groups usually do not arrive at a decision by chance. It begins at the beginning and ends at the end by following a series of steps that are common to almost all groups. It is no accident when sound decisions are reached.

The steps are not always clearly defined but the discussion leader should always be aware of where the group is and where it is going. It is his task to help the group define its objectives and then to reach them. He is much like a hired fishing guide saying things like 'So you want bass, trout or pike?' 'How long are you prepared to spend at it?' 'How hard do you want to work?' 'Perhaps you should cast over there.' 'You reel it in and I'll help you net it'.

### **Group Stages**

The steps mentioned below are merely indicative of the general stages a group passes through. Like a road map they show the route that is being followed but not the hills and valleys or other terrain. However, they do show a logical pattern of progression.



### **Recognize the Problem**

- if a problem does not exist, why bother?
- agree on what is to be discussed
- agree that it is relevant to the group

### **Examine the Problem**

- the problem should be defined clearly enough to be able to exchange ideas and information
- the scope of the problem should be understood

### **Look at the Facts**

- What is real and what is fiction?
- discuss problems thoroughly and systematically
- diagnose why problems occur

### **Propose Tentative Decisions**

- based on the facts brought forward, what steps can be taken to remedy the problems

### **Select Suitable Decisions**

- get general agreement on the most appropriate method of dealing with the problems

After this process has been followed and completed, the leader should take time to find out if all persons are satisfied with the decisions that have been reached.

### **The Recorder**

Although later in this pamphlet we will be talking about the specific things the discussion leader and the members can do to help the group move along, there is one important person who should be mentioned. This is the recorder or for lack of a better word, the note taker.

The recorder has a very important role to play in the group. Appointed either before the group is formed or at the beginning of the session he serves as the historian – noting the important points of the discussion.

At various times during the session, he can remind the group of what has been discussed, what suggestions have been made and what decisions have been reached. At the end of the session he can briefly summarize what has happened. Often he may be called upon to give a report on a group's discussion either to a larger conference or in writing and to summarize its conclusions.

Thus a group should not pick a recorder casually (like 'She's the only woman here' or 'He has a pencil in his hand') but should look for some specific qualities. These would include

- an ability to select important points of discussion
- an ability to accurately reflect the feelings and opinions of the group
- a willingness to do the job

### **Remember**

- a sound discussion is no accident
- a discussion group passes through certain stages and they should be recognized
- a good recorder is important to the group

## **THE DISCUSSION LEADER**

'Whatever this is that I am, it is a little  
flesh and breath, and the ruling part'

Marcus Aurelius Antonius Meditations II.2

In these pages we are attempting to give you, the discussion leader, an idea of some of the things that you might do to help the group arrive at sound decisions. However, in many cases these are technical points and we do not wish to ignore the very important role played by the personal qualities and behavior of the leader.

The discussion leader must work in such a way that he encourages all the other members to express their opinions while remaining studiously neutral himself. This is often a very difficult assignment. Leaders are often selected because they hold strong opinions and have the ability to articulate them.

### **Personal Qualities**

It behooves us now to look at some of the qualities desirable in a

discussion leader. It is indeed a rare man who possesses all these qualities to their fullest extent. However, these points can be used to frame a picture of such a person. He is

### **Friendly**

- the type of person group members will respond to

### **Fair but firm**

- neutral in approach

### **An Attentive Listener**

- hearing not only the words that are spoken but what the speaker is really trying to say

### **Patient**

- participants must be allowed to clearly understand what is being said even if it slows down the progress of the group and those who are not articulate must be allowed to state their ideas

### **Clear Thinking**

- has the ability to summarize and correlate the various points of view

### **Unaggressive**

- the leader does not push his own opinions

### **Sensitive**

- must be aware of the feeling of group members
- should be aware when group consensus is reached

### **Aware of the Value of Discussion**

- the leader should be confident that the group process is a sound way to reach a decision

These then are some of the personal qualities that a discussion leader brings to the group. He is now ready to begin functioning in the particular role he has accepted. There are many things that a discussion leader can do to help the group move along towards its objective and we will deal with these next. However, it should be kept in mind that the ability to sense what is required of the leader in a certain situation comes basically through experience. We are only attempting to provide the framework for you, not make you an expert.

## **The Role of the Leader**

The following are some of the things a discussion leader can do to help the group in its examination of the topic and development of solutions.

### **Comes Prepared**

— the leader should learn as much as possible about the subject to be discussed before the group starts. This implies the gathering of facts from a variety of sources — newspapers, radio and TV, press, etc. If there is anything really pertinent to the group discussion that can be readily reproduced, copies might be given to the members. The leader, if he has any way of contacting the members beforehand, might suggest suitable readings.

### **Gets Discussion Started**

— the beginning of a discussion group must be very carefully planned, especially if the participants are unknown to each other. There are two potential dangers:

- 1) that people may be hesitant about starting to talk
- 2) that discussion starts off topic

There are several things that a leader can do to help the group get off the ground

- 1) If the group is small enough he can have everyone introduce himself.
- 2) Have the participants list the major points they wish to discuss.
- 3) Clarify the topic so that all the participants have a clear idea of what is to be discussed.

### **Helps Group Reach Conclusions**

There are a variety of different purposes for discussion groups:

- defining problems and needs
- planning programs
- evaluating programs
- raising questions to be answered later

and a vast number of other purposes. No matter what the reason for its existence, however, a discussion group follows a series of steps to reach its conclusion. The discussion leader acts as a guide for the group as it moves through this process. He sees the goal, anticipates pitfalls, warns when the wrong trail is taken, and achieves satisfaction when the group achieves its target. He must always be careful though that he does not direct the discussion and if the group decides it wants to go somewhere else — so be it!

The leader performs numerous tasks throughout the discussion. It would be impossible (and unnecessary) to enumerate them all but there are several that are crucial. These include:

- . keeping group on topic
- . encouraging individual opinions
- . making sure that the group has a clear understanding of discussion
- . encouraging friendly understanding
- . summarizing occasionally
- . indicating when and how discussion strays
- . helping avoid misunderstanding among participants where they agree and where they disagree
- . encouraging systematic methods and the use of facts
- . providing whatever information he can about the topics being discussed
- . indicating when agreement has been reached

When all is said and done the best indication of a job well done is a decision reached that provides satisfaction for all the members of the group.

#### **Remember**

- . the personal qualities of a leader are as important as what he does
- . the leader's role is to help the group achieve sound and satisfying conclusions

## **MEMBERS' ROLES**

'Multitudes in the Valley of Decision'

Bible, Joel 3:14

Members have the most important roles to play in a discussion group. The way they participate and the tasks they perform will



ultimately effect the decision that they reach. At the end of this paper is an appendix listing what are called the FUNCTIONAL ROLES and NON-FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR of group members. These may be categorized as helpful and non-helpful activities of members in aiding the group to reach its objectives.

Although we are not dealing with members' non-functional behaviour directly, it can be said that this usually occurs because the conditions suggested earlier were not met.

- the room is too hot
- the topic is of no interest
- the participant has been made to feel that his ideas have no value.

The functional roles that a member plays are those that help the group achieve its objectives and help the group members achieve a feeling of satisfaction. Among the major such roles are:

- stating the issue clearly
- asking for information
- giving information
- arbitrating
- evaluating progress

As can readily be seen many of the tasks are the same as those of the leader. Indeed, this is one key to the measurement of a group's effectiveness — the degree to which members assume the various tasks of leadership. The group should be encouraged to share this leadership amongst all members and not become dependent upon the assigned discussion leader.

At various times in the life of a discussion group different members will play different roles. Thus, the leader should always steer clear of stereo-typing the group members. Many a good suggestion has been overlooked because the members feel that 'anything that comes from that buffoon may be funny but it's not helpful'.

The leader then should regard the discussion group as a "members' group" and encourage them to use it to achieve satisfaction.



## **Remember**

- the most important people in a discussion group are the members
- the roles of members are ever changing but they should be encouraged to take on leadership
- leadership cannot be given, it is only accepted

## **TECHNIQUES**

‘You know my methods, Watson’

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, **The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes**

To deal with discussion group techniques in less than a full book is to court disaster. They are not intended as substitutes for full and open discussion but only used in specific situations. Thus when listing several of these we can only add the warning – ‘handle with caution’.

The following list is not a complete one. It touches only on a few of the possible techniques that can be used in a discussion group and even then are only lightly dealt with.

### **Voting**

A vote in a discussion group runs a far distant second to reaching a consensus as a way of making a decision. A decision based on a 6-5 ratio has split a group, perhaps needlessly.

A straw vote which indicates opinion and not a decision can sometimes be helpful to further discussion.

### **Brainstorming**

The technique of brainstorming is often useful if one wishes to get out a lot of ideas when there are many possible solutions or programs for a specific problem.

With this method the problem is posed and participants are given a specified amount of time (e.g. 4 minutes) to come out with all the

solutions they can think of. During this time no discussion is permitted on whether or not an idea is good or bad. The ideas are listed and form the basis for the discussion which follows.

### **Role Playing**

There are many variations of role playing that can be used in a discussion group. If you are interested in further information, your local library should have books and articles that deal with this topic.

### **Sub-Group Discussion**

If there is one point that is to be discussed in detail and a definite conclusion drawn it is sometimes possible to split up the discussion group into smaller units for a limited period of time. After this is finished they report back to the larger discussion group.

### **Visual Aids**

It is very helpful if a blackboard or sheets of newsprint are available for the group use.

If a discussion leader is interested in learning about his craft there are a variety of books on the subject that deal much more extensively with techniques. The bibliography to this booklet lists some and the library will have many more.

### **Remember**

- . techniques are no substitute for sound discussion
- . they are used to add an extra dimension

## **AT THE END**

'This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning'.

Winston Churchill

Since a discussion group does not exist in a vacuum it is necessary that we know to what end the conclusions of the group will be

used. If these conclusions were valid then they must be of some use.

A discussion group has usually been spun off of a larger forum and has to report to this group. Depending on what has been requested of the group, this can be an important part of the discussion.

Sometimes groups are asked to bring in recommended programs or solutions. If this is the case, time should be taken in the group to get agreement as to what these recommendations are to be and what is to be said. Unless this is done the group is often surprised to hear their representative give a report that sounds nothing like what they remember went on.

If the group has been asked to come up with questions to be used in the larger session they should agree on what questions are to be asked and in what order. Then if time runs out before all the questions have been answered the most important ones will have been asked.

If at all possible a report of the proceedings of the group should be given to the members as soon as possible after the meeting is over. It will serve to refresh their memory of what went on and to remind them of further action to be taken.

If the group has agreed to take further action then some members should be assigned the necessary responsibilities before the meeting ends. Otherwise, it becomes much more difficult to get people to take action because it is not as fresh in their mind and the degree of commitment to decisions decreases.

### **Remember**

- agreements as to future action should be reached and understood by all participants before the group adjourns.

## **CONCLUSION**

We have briefly glanced at the discussion group and your role as its leader. Without wishing to get more involved in the limited space

we have available perhaps we should sum up by saying that the discussion leader has to be in a position to acquire three things:

knowledge  
experience  
understanding

In this paper we have tried to provide an opportunity for you to gain some **knowledge** of the group process and group leadership techniques. It is by no means complete but we hope that you have learned something that will be helpful to you in your discussion group.

As you become involved in discussions you will gain the **experience** in helping people to achieve effective group decisions.

**Understanding** can only come about through your own effort. You must believe in people and in their ability to achieve sound decisions through the discussion group process. If this is not acquired all the rest is game playing.

We started with a warning, now let us end with one. This booklet is merely a tool and if it appears you are going to be called upon to play a different role than the one described herein to help the group members achieve their objectives then the book goes out the window. This is not intended to be your bible.

## **APPENDIX**

### **FUNCTIONAL ROLES AND NON-FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR**

Reprinted from ADULT LEADERSHIP  
'tool kit' of January 1953

ADULT LEADERSHIP  
is a publication of the  
Adult Education Association of the  
U.S.A.

Here is a glossary of some of the most essential functional roles of group members.

**Task Roles** (functions required in selecting and carrying out a group task)

Initiating activity:	proposing solutions; suggesting new ideas, new definitions of the problem, new attack on problem or new organization of material.
Seeking information:	asking for clarification of suggestions, requesting additional information or facts.
Seeking opinion:	looking for an expression of feeling about something from the members, seeking clarification of values, or suggestions or ideas.
Giving information:	offering facts or generalizations, relating one's own experience to group problem to illustrate a point.
Giving opinion:	stating an opinion or belief concerning a suggestion or one of several suggestions, particularly concerning its value rather than its factual basis.
Elaborating:	clarifying, giving examples or developing meanings, trying to envision how a proposal might work out if adopted.
Co-ordinating:	showing relationships among various ideas or suggestions, trying to pull ideas and suggestions together, trying to draw together activities of various sub-groups or members.
Summarizing:	pulling together related ideas or suggestions, re-stating suggestions after the group has discussed them.



**Testing feasibility:** making application of suggestions to real situations, examining practicality and workability of ideas, pre-evaluating decisions.

**Group Building and Maintenance Roles** (functions required in strengthening and maintaining group life and activities)

**Encouraging:** being friendly, warm, responsive to others, praising others and their ideas, agreeing with and accepting contributions of others.

**Gate keeping:** trying to make it possible for another member to make a contribution to the group by saying, 'We haven't heard anything from Jim, yet,' or suggesting limited talking time for everyone so that all will have a chance to be heard.

**Standard setting:** expressing standards for the group to use in choosing its content or procedures, or in evaluating its decisions; reminding the group to avoid decisions which conflict with group standards.

**Following:** going along with the decisions of the group, somewhat passively accepting ideas of others, serving as audience during group discussions and decision-making.

**Expressing group feelings:** summarizing what the group feeling is sensed to be, describing reactions of the group to ideas or solutions.

**Both Group Task and Group Maintenance Roles**

**Evaluating:** submitting group decisions or accomplishments to comparison with group standards, measuring accomplishments against goals.

Diagnosing:	determining sources of difficulties, appropriate steps to take next, the main blocks to progress.
Testing for consensus:	tentatively asking for group opinions in order to find out if the group is nearing consensus on a decision, sending up trial balloons to test group opinions.
Mediating:	harmonizing, conciliating differences in points of view, making compromise solutions.
Relieving tension:	draining off negative feeling by testing or pouring oil on troubled waters, putting a tense situation in a wider context.

From time to time – more often perhaps than anyone likes to admit – people behave in NON-FUNCTIONAL ways that do not help and sometimes actually harm the group and the work it is trying to do. Some of the more common types of non-functional behaviour are described below.

**Note:** In using a classification like the one above, people need to guard against the tendency to blame any person (whether themselves or another) who falls into “non-functional” behaviour. It is more useful to regard such behaviour as a symptom that all is not well with the group’s ability to satisfy individual needs through group-centred activity. Further, people need to be alert to the fact that each person is likely to interpret such behaviour differently. For example, what appears as “blocking” to one person may appear to another as a needed effort to “test feasibility”.

## Types of Non-functional Behaviour

Being aggressive:	working for status by criticizing or blaming others, showing hostility against the group or some individual, deflating the ego or status of others.
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Blocking:	interfering with the progress of the group by going off on a tangent, citing personal experiences unrelated to the problem, arguing too much on a point, rejecting ideas without consideration.
Self-confessing:	using the group as a sounding board, expressing personal, non-group-oriented feelings or points of view.
Competing:	vying with others to produce the best idea, talk the most, play the most roles, gain favour with the leader.
Seeking sympathy:	trying to induce other group members TO BE SYMPATHETIC to one's problems or misfortunes, deploring one's own situation or disparaging one's own ideas to gain support.
Special pleading:	introducing or supporting suggestions related to one's own pet concerns or philosophies, lobbying.
Horsing around:	clowning, joking, mimicking, disrupting the work of the group.
Seeking recognition:	attempting to call attention to one's self by loud or excessive talking, extreme ideas, unusual behaviour.
Withdrawing:	acting indifferent or passive, resorting to excessive formality, daydreaming, doodling, whispering to others, wandering from the subject.

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